University of Alberta

Developing a Process for Evaluating Education in a First Nations Community

by

Donald Serge Tessier

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

in

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Abstract

Native students suffer high dropout rates and low academic achievement. The Community leaders of one band-operated school, this study's focus, did not consider the external evaluations mandated by the federal Department of Indian Affairs to be helpful in resolving these issues. In cooperation with the community, the purpose of my study was to develop a school evaluative process that was more empowering to the people, more relevant to the community and reflective of its values. The study focuses on the methodology that was developed (the process) and not the specific findings.

Based on a critical social theory orientation towards emancipatory learning, I chose a methodology involving participatory action research methods so as to develop a process relevant to the problems and circumstances of this First Nations community. Being known in the community having worked there almost a decade previously, I initially spent time getting reacquainted with the people and talking about my study in order to encourage participation. I formed the volunteers into peer groups. These gathering circles were based on a combination of traditional Native practices of community decision-making and problem solving and action research methods. In all, 47 people from all sectors of the community (i.e., students, parents, grandparents, school staff, health care workers, administrators, elders, and leaders) were involved in peer groups. I also held 52 separate interviews. Each circle met over an 11-month period to identify and discuss concerns, issues, and claims. A resolution list was then brought to solicited representatives from the circles for their anonymous feedback. A final list of

resolutions was developed and approved for presentation to the school board for adoption and action.

Overall, participants saw the process as effective. The gathering circle methodology has the potential to be a viable model for any community-based examination that seeks cross-community consensus. Based on the experience of being an "informed friend" and facilitator of this process, I identified a number of limitations and recommendations for others who might choose to use this methodology.

Acknowledgements

This life journey along which we all must travel is a shared experience, and like so many of our treasured life experiences, this milestone could not have been completed without the assistance and support of many people. I would like to acknowledge the contributions of those who have helped me make this dream possible.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

For decades Canada's Aboriginal peoples have sought to control their own education. Today in Alberta this aim has largely been fulfilled. By 1999 all but one Native[1] school in Alberta were locally managed.[2]

According to DIAND, a First Nations school is defined as locally managed when monies are disbursed, based on nominal rolls, to a First Nations authority charged with operating that school. The First Nations school authority has local decision-making power in such areas as hiring staff, purchasing instructional material, and making capital acquisitions. Some school boards may choose to contract out for school services, often with the Northland's School Division #61 being contracted.

One reason suggested for the transfer of educational services to the First Nations communities was the very low educational achievement of Native students under the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND, 1969). Since that time, however, we do not know if success rates have risen, or if so, to what extent. Observation and anecdotal information would indicate that there have been improvements, but also that Native education has still not reached parity with non-Native education in Canada.

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[1] I have used the terms *Native*, *Indian*, and *First Nations* interchangeably because usage varies across Canada.

[2] From a discussion with the Superintendent of Schools, Department of Indian Affairs & Northern Development, Edmonton. At a minimum, all other schools at least manage their own educational funds (July 1999).

Self-management of funds for First Nations school authorities was accompanied by a requirement that an evaluation of each school be conducted every five years to monitor the quality of learning. Traditionally , their own in-house evaluators followed a set format for DIAND evaluations. This involved evaluation of budgetary items, staff evaluations, and performance checks on instructional, administrative, and staff assignments and duties. Now the focus has turned to private firms hired by the local authority carrying out these evaluations, which generally have a standard format and, in particular, have not been designed to include specific First Nations contexts. Private firms hired by the local authority have usually carried out these evaluations, which generally have a standard format and in particular have not been designed to include specific First Nations contexts. Instead, schools are assessed against a set of benchmarks applied to all provincial schools. Native communities have felt uninvolved in the process. As a result, local authorities have found the evaluators' use of standard measurements to be both unhelpful and frustrating, and, not surprisingly, these evaluations have often been shelved and their recommendations ignored.

The Native community in this study had just gone through such an evaluation a few months before I began this study. That evaluation process, followed by a highly negative final report, had proved traumatic for the school, the community, and its leadership.

The Chief and council agreed to my request that I work with them to develop a different way of looking at their school. I was excited at the prospect of helping to design and implement a distinctive process that would allow the local community to determine its own strengths and weaknesses and to find community-based solutions to its

difficulties. In this study I have detailed the work that I undertook with members of the community to design and implement such a community-based and community-driven process. My purpose was to create a process that would empower community members by raising their awareness of the possibilities and issues of Native education as interpreted by the community. It is also my hope that this process will have potential use in other communities facing similar challenges.

Background to the Study

Almost 30 years have passed since the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) issued its response to the *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* (DIAND, 1969), which had proposed (p. 6) that the provinces take over the same responsibilities for Indians that they had for other provincial citizens. The NIB (1972) position paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education*, rejected the proposed transfer of responsibility for Native education as an attempt on the part of the federal government to abandon its obligations to Native people, and further asserted Native leaders' inherent right to control their children's education.

Apart from the political implications of these statements, no educator in the field of Native education could have been completely unaware of the shortcomings of the old, federally operated Native school system. Assimilation of Native children into White culture had been the goal. By all standards of measurement, it had failed dismally in its mandate to educate Native children. High dropout rates and academic failure were the norm.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Native peoples continued to demand control of their own educational institutions. In 1982 the federal government issued the *Indian Education Paper Phase One* (DIAND, 1982), stressing the need to improve the quality of Native education and deeming it to be in the best interest of Native students to devolve the control of Native education to Indian society. This policy shift resulted in a rapid move toward local control of education in Native communities in Canada during the late 1980s. The percentage of Native children enrolled in federal schools had declined from 24.7% in 1985 (NIB, 1988) to 8.7% in 1991 (MacPherson, 1991), whereas enrolment in First Nations-operated schools increased from 26% to 44% over the same period.[3]

Implementation of local control resulted in at least one immediate, measurable benefit. Native students were staying in school longer:

> In 1984-85, almost twice as many Indian students were enrolled in grades 10 through 12 than had been the case in 1971-72. On the eve of the National Indian Brotherhood's position paper, no more than two-thirds of the children completing grades 5, 6, or 7 returned to school and just over half of those in grade 8 remained. By 1984-85, the proportion of returning pupils, while still less than the national average, had risen considerably, particularly at the higher levels; two-thirds to three-quarters of students from grades 5 through 8 had returned, along with 55 per cent from grade 9, 38 per cent from grade 10, and 31 per cent from grade 11. (Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1987, p. 17)

But in spite of these obvious improvements under local control, Native education remained problematic. Dropout rates remained far higher for Natives than for other students, along with lower than expected academic achievement.

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[3] However, these figures do not take into account the large number of Native families living in the cities. In 1992 it was reported that a significantly large portion of eligible Native children in Canada did not have access to band-operated schools (Urion, 1992).

In 1988 the second policy statement, *Native Education in Alberta*, was issued by the NIB. Basically, it confirmed what was being said about Native education throughout North America. It called the general state of Native education in Alberta "deplorable" and concluded that the failure to respond to the special needs of Native students was "a shameful act of intolerance and misunderstanding" (p. a). It noted that no group in Canada had been studied to the extent of the Native population: "It is time that the Government took the studies from the shelves and turned them into policies" (p. a). Some have felt that local school boards still do not enjoy full autonomy from restrictive federal control. Brady (1995) called the Canadian experience "unique" inasmuch as

> the legislative framework necessary to Native control has yet to be developed. Although only a few sections of the Indian Act (1951) (sections 114 to 123) deal with education, they do serve to limit Indian leaders' authority over its schools. . . . In other words, whereas the federal government may have agreed with the principle of Native control of Native education, it has done little to transfer legislative control over education to First Nations Government. . . . The result is that the term 'band controlled' somewhat misrepresents reality. A more accurate description, as Hall (1992) describes it, would be 'federally controlled, band operated school' (p. 57). As long as legislative and legal authority continues to reside in non-Native legislative bodies, Native people's ability to control their children's education will be, to all intents and purposes, severely restricted. (pp. 357-358)

Yet it is hard to imagine how a shift of power from one legislative body to another could bring about the changes needed to keep Native children in school and learning on par with other children in the province. What Brady and the authors of *Native Education in Alberta* (Alberta Department of Education, 1984) did not fully explore is *who* has the ultimate power to change Native education for the benefit of the students and the community. It is my belief and the belief of First Nations communities that the NIB report was called *Indian Control of Indian Education*. that it is the people

themselves—parents, community members, and teachers: those who are most involved in the day-to-day lives of students—who need to be empowered to use the system to implement that change.

Indeed, it would appear that there is no inherent reason for Native students to fail at school. Eberhard (1989) felt that the only way to address the problems encountered by Native students was by early identification and intervention. He also determined that Native pupils who stayed in school were equal to any other pupil who remained in school (p. 39). Agreeing with most other researchers, he concluded that the best intervention was to increase parental involvement: "The problems of kids need to be jointly owned by teacher and parent. Owned problems get solved" (p. 39). It has been a pervasive hope that bringing the community into the schools and the school into the community would give rise to higher rates of success in Native education. In my opinion evaluations of this and other Native schools have failed because they did not take into account community needs and the unique nature of each school's community and that community involvement in the local school is its best hope for future success.

Since I initially became interested in this study, little appears to have changed for Native students. In fact, in 2000, the Auditor General clearly stated that there is a parity gap between Native and mainstream students (Minister of Public Works, p. 1). The Auditor General further stated that 22 studies have been conducted on how the department might enhance its delivery of services to First Nations students and that, although the department has funded these studies, it does not appear to have followed through on any of the recommendations that it received.

However, there have been gains:

> The Department reports an improvement in the high school completion rates for Indian students over five years, from 31 percent to 37 percent. This compares with a 65 percent high school completion rate for the Canadian population as a whole in 1996. At this rate of progress, it will take approximately 23 years for the Indian population on reserves to reach education parity with the overall Canadian rate for high school completion, if that rate remains constant. We believe that more and faster progress is urgently needed. (p. 4)

The report (Minister of Public Works, 2000) continued that there is a need for the coordination of services provided by DIAND. Whereas the department continues to be a funding provider, it is also the only arbiter of standards available for First Nations schools. Yet there appears to be no consistency in standards or funding. An example provided by the Auditor General involves special-needs student funding, which varies school by school from $581 per student to $65,650 per student per year (p. 4). Although the department requires evaluations of First Nations schools, it does not appear to have any mechanism to follow through on the recommendations generated. "So why then does the Department fund and collect such information if there does not appear to be a plan in place to act on such information?" (p. 4) The Auditor General also noted that many of these reports are either missing or completed and show areas requiring improvement, but there is no evidence that remedial measures have been taken.

McCue (1999) stated that one of the problems facing Native education today is the apparent lack of standards. It is very difficult to attempt to evaluate a school or educational system when these standards do not exist. He further stated that there has been little or no involvement of community members. Instead, they are forced to deal with the preexisting provincial educational standards. Nothing appears to be viewed from a First Nations' perspective.

Other problems also exist. Many evaluations have never been completed as required (at least 29%, or 31, in one region), and yet there appear to be no recriminations from the department, according to the Auditor General (Minister of Public Works, 2000). First Nations citizens have the right to be concerned if there is no captain at the helm. The evaluations that have been completed tend to be statistically based and focused on mainstream standards. Although required every five years, it appears that no one is even certain that these evaluations have been done. The Auditor General has demonstrated that the attainment rates of Native students are still not equal to that of non-Native students. Typically reported are such things as the number of students, rates of attendance, finances, and achievement results. It is my firm belief than an effective evaluation must involve the stakeholders in goal establishment, planning, and the delineation of measurable outcomes. Cardinal and Hildebrant (2000) stated that the traditional education of Native students is "related to self-sufficiency" (p. 44) and that all of the community is involved. The village really did help to raise the child.

Research Focus

When I began this study, two previous external evaluations of the local school already sat on a shelf gathering dust. In my preliminary discussions with them, the Chief and council told me that the most recent external evaluation process was not relevant to the life experience of members of the community. The evaluation team had been highly critical of a number of areas, including the "hands-off" attitude of DIAND. They had noted a lack of a feeling of teamwork, pointing out that the school board and the school itself seemed to have little need to account for their actions and that the board had been

left unguided as to the day-to-day operation of the school system. The evaluator viewed his external evaluation as one remedy for the lack of guidance given to the board. However, the Chief and band council felt that they had no way to assess the quality or even the validity of these comments. In addition, the recommendations were related completely to what was lacking and provided no means of remedy. The designs of previous evaluations did not seem appropriate given the major shift that had taken place in the life experiences of the community between the former federally run school and the new locally managed school. They thought that the evaluations did not touch upon those school issues that were most important to community members. What the Chief and council said was needed was a method of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the school that directly related to Native values. Therefore, I sought an effective community-based process that was relevant to the community and would reflect its values.

Most Native cultures in Canada have an inherent tradition of internal consultation in their communities. The talking circle, for example, has been a traditional process for achieving consensus within this community. The talking circle demonstrates the respect of each member of the group for the other members. All may and usually will participate. Only the person holding a symbolic artifact—for example, a stone or a stick—may speak and must be listened to. The artifact is passed from member to member until all have been heard. Issues and problems are discussed in this manner until consensus is achieved.

If the Chief and band council cannot achieve consensus, they will frequently call the community's Elders (the band's senior citizens) into board meetings. The opinions of the Elders are held in high esteem. They speak with the voice of tradition and with the best interests of the community and its culture in mind. Few major decisions are made

without their input. This process of consultation within the community is not generally recognized in Western models of school evaluation. From the outset I thought that this, or a similar, traditional method of consensus building and problem solving would serve well as a basis for a process by which the whole community could examine and assess the strengths and weaknesses of its school and reach a consensus concerning educational goals.

Four questions are at the heart of this study.

1. Aspects of the Talking Circle tradition are present in collaborative models of action research. I, therefore, adopted an action research methodology to explore the development of a process for school evaluation. Is this an effective methodology?
2. What form did that process take?
3. How well did that process function in practice?
4. What characteristics of the process were essential and should be retained in other community-based assessments of education?

Ethical Considerations

The Research Ethics Board of the Faculties of Education and Extension approved this research study. In conducting this research, I was committed to the advancement of human knowledge and understanding, while ensuring that the participants in my field research were protected from harm during that process. I adhered to the principles espoused by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. The participants were fully informed of the nature of the research before their participation. All participation was

voluntary. All possible precautions have been taken to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Personal Background

I began my teaching career in 1975 in a remote, fly-in Cree community in Northern Manitoba. After an initial culture shock, I quickly settled into my position as a junior high school teacher and eventually administrator of the school. The student population numbered about 75. This was the beginning of a career that has now spanned over 25 years of teaching and administration in rural and remote areas of Western Canada.

In the early 1980s I was hired as school principal and teacher in a Native community in Alberta. This experience broadened and intensified my interest in Native education. After three years I chose to move to a school in another community. Three years later I changed schools again, remaining in that community as principal for four years. This was a challenging period for me. I was given the opportunity to open new schools in some of these communities, including the community where this study was conducted. I was thankful for the trust and confidence that local parents and band councils had in me. I would like to think that I had some impact on the organization and delivery of effective programs for the children. Currently, I am an administrator with a large public school division serving First Nations children. I chose to complete an EdD degree because I wanted to enhance my understanding and advance my practice in First Nations education. Therefore, in this study I focus on process, believing that much can be learned through listening and attending to the needs and desires of the community.

Outline of the Study

Chapter 2 provides a general context on issues regarding change, and in chapter 3 the community-based process used in the study is outlined and linked to participatory action research. Chapter 4 provides the context of the process and its outcomes. Chapter 5 is an analysis of the process. Chapter 6 provides a review of the study questions and findings, reflections on the process and its capacity for bringing about change, and, finally, recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER 2

DEFINITIONS AND FUNCTIONS OF EVALUATION

This study examines the process by which the members of one First Nations community, unhappy with its current educational system, sought answers within their own community. Acting as a facilitator, I attempted to help them develop a process that would best serve the uniqueness of their situation. In this chapter I explore some literature pertinent to my choices in the designing of that process. I briefly discuss definitions of evaluation in the work of Hill (1986) and Scriven (1991) and then focus on maintaining change in reform. I conclude by discussing Stake's (1974) responsive evaluation model as the standard model that I saw as coming closest to the needs of this community.

Hill (1986) stated that schools, as institutions, are poorly organized for evaluation. He saw this as being due to the fact that teachers operate quite independently but are not likely to have input into the overall school program. Teachers were seen as frequently viewing school evaluation as a negative process of more interest to the evaluator than to those being evaluated. In the case of this community, these sentiments were held not only by teachers but also by board members, administrators and, not least, parents. Therefore it is not surprising that, generally, recommendations were not implemented. The evaluative model must be effective and reflective of what is happening at the school. This was what this Native community desired.

Scriven (1991) defined evaluation as "the process of determining the merit, value or worth of something, or the product of that process" (p. 139); but it is important that he

further defined it as an investigative and creative "transdiscipline" (p. 1), bringing together an array of tools and disciplines to explore a broad range of human activities:

> The evaluation process normally involves some identification of relevant standards of merit, worth or value; some investigation of the performance of the evaluands on these standards; and some integration or synthesis of the results to achieve an overall evaluation. (p. 139)

In my concept of a community-appropriate evaluation process, I would extend Scriven's (1991) "transdiscipline" to include the life experiences and talents of a wide range of community members invited to participate. Scriven's "integration or synthesis" would become consultation and consensus within the community.

Hill (1986, pp. 12-13) stated that there are four basic functions of evaluation in education. The first three, accountability, intervention, and decision making, can be used to plan curriculum, funding, and other general school issues. Accountability is the function of determining whether standards have been met and is primarily an evaluation of teacher performance. Intervention occurs when evaluation provides insight into an existing problem and precipitates change. Decision making, "based on evidence and reason" (p. 12), drives goal setting and annual planning in the school. The fourth function of evaluation, according to Hill, is meaning making, which is "the basis for the social interaction model of planned change" (p. 13). This involves the human-based "what, why, and hows" involved in day-to-day school operations—important elements in understanding schools. Meaning informs professionals and clients as they facilitate improvement. It makes change and reasons for change coherent.

These four functions needed to be addressed to varying degrees by my process, but especially meaning making and intervention, because these have been factors missing

in previous investigations of this community's school system. Meaning making translates as shared community consultation that leads to a consensus of what the issues and goals of the community are vis-à-vis its school. Interventions may be said to be actions that initiate change in the school and the community. The outcome of the process should be a coordinated set of interventions clustered around shared, coherent, meaningful goals. These interventions must go beyond structural changes. There is a need for change that fosters a continuing culture of consensus building and shared meaning making in this community.

Change Process

Smylie (1994) stated that organizational change

> is [a] tricky and frustrating business. Efforts to improve organizations are frequently thwarted by powerful conservative forces within them and their environments that make persistence paramount to change (March and Olsen, 1989). Schools have a notorious reputation for stability and preservation of existing institutional orders and practices. (p. 39)

However, in the case of this community's school system, change has been a constant over the past decade—change from a small federal school with only 50 pupils to a larger, locally controlled school with a student body in excess of 200; change from a small, dilapidated school building to a large modern plant that has itself undergone a major expansion during those 10 years: frequent changes of principals, teachers, and staff; and changes in the local political leadership governing the school. By all accounts, school policies have fluctuated from year to year and sometimes from moment to moment. A pervasive sense of insecurity has at times prevailed among the staff because of the likelihood of sudden changes in the demands made of them, or even changes in their

salaries and other fundamentals of their contracts with the school board. Far from being fixed and conservative, this school has suffered from an influx of changes from many sources without noticeable improvement in the quality of the educational experience.

Obviously the quantity of change, and even the willingness to change, is not lacking in this school system. It is rather the quality of change, and the sustainability and coherence of that change, that have been lacking.

The Process of Change

Being knowledgeable about the change process may be both the best defense and the best offense we have in achieving substantial education reform (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 752). After years of failed reform efforts, educators are finally coming to the realization that an understanding of the change process is critical to successful school change. But few people know what that really means. Therein lies the problem. Educators need to know why efforts to change fail.

Fullan and Miles (1992) also believe that serious education reform will never be achieved until there is a significant increase in the number of people—leaders and other participants alike—who have come to internalize and habitually act on basic knowledge of how successful change takes place. Reformers talk of the need for deeper, second-order changes in the structures and cultures of schools, rather than superficial first-order changes. But no change would be more fundamental than a dramatic expansion of the capacity of individuals and organizations to understand and deal with change. This generic capacity is worth more than a hundred individual success stories of implementing specific innovations.

I knew that for my process to be of continuing use to the community, it would have to take into account the need to act on my knowledge of how and why successful change takes place. It would have to be a process that could be ongoing, evolving, and self-corrective.

Even success stories are apt to fail over time, according to Fullan and Miles (1992). Schools and districts are overloaded with problems—and, ironically, with solutions that do not work. Thus things get worse instead of better. "The problem is not really lack of innovation, but the enormous overload of fragmented, uncoordinated, and ephemeral attempts at change" (p. 745). Fullan and Miles outlined seven basic reasons that reform efforts fail, each of which "should be understood in combination, as a set" (p. 745). I treat these in some detail because they proved very informative in designing my process.

Defective Maps of Change

The first reason that reforms fail is that everyone involved with the school reform (e.g., teachers, principals, parents, students, board members, Elders, department officials, legislators, test makers, publishers) "has a personal map of how change proceeds" (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 745). These personal maps often take the form of statements such as:

> Resistance is inevitable, because people resist change. . . . Every school is unique. . . . Schools are essentially conservative institutions, harder to change than other organizations. . . . You need a mission, objectives, and a series of tasks laid out well in advance. . . . Full participation of everyone involved in a change is essential. . . . Keep it simple, stupid: go for small, easy changes rather than big, demanding ones. . . . Mandate change, because people won't do it otherwise. (pp. 745-746)

People act according to their personal maps, but these maps do not provide sufficient guidance and are not reliable. Some of their statements are unproven or "simply self-sealing and tautological" (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 746), whereas others, though probably true, offer little guidance. Some maps praise rational planning, such as needing a mission and objectives, and other maps advocate improvisation. These personal maps are often "in conflict with themselves or with the maps of colleagues" (p. 746). Studies have shown that neither rational planning nor improvisation is "valid as a guide to successful school reform" (p. 746). Similarly, the personal map of KISS ("keep it simple, stupid")—that is to say, initiate small, easy changes rather than large, sweeping ones—appears obvious, and yet studies have indicated that "substantial change efforts that address multiple problems are more likely to succeed and survive than small-scale, easily trivialized innovations" (p. 746). The politically attractive map that dictates that change should be mandated not only does not work but quite often makes matters worse. School changes require skill, commitment, desire, and judgment on the part of those who must change. "Our aim here is not to debunk all our maps. Maps are crucial. But unless a map is a valid representation of the territory, we won't get where we want to go" (p. 746).

These maps vividly depicted the state of affairs in the community. Everyone had a personal map of how the school and the community could be improved, but until those maps meshed together and until there was consensus of the shape of the territory that those maps depicted, there could be no meaningful change. Until now efforts at reform in the school had been piecemeal at best. I was told that policies on discipline, for instance, were seemingly reinvented every year, or reinvented after every crisis, and often to no

purpose when political authorities outside the school countermanded disciplinary decisions made in the school.

Complexity

Efforts toward change are "complex—both in the substance of their goals and in the capacity of individuals and institutions to carry out and coordinate reforms" (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 746). Finding solutions to complex problems is not easy. "Education is a complex system, and its reform is even more complex" (p. 746). The number of layers involved in even first-order changes (e.g., curriculum and instruction, school organization, student services, community involvement, teacher in-service training) is mind boggling. Second-order changes (e.g., school cultures, teacher/student relationships, values) are even more problematic, asserted Fullan and Miles. We simply do not know how to solve complex problems (e.g., higher order education goals) because solutions have never been developed. The best approach to reform is first to acknowledge that we do not have all of the answers. "In other words, we need a different map for solving complex rather than simple problems" (p. 746). Acknowledging that someone other than school authorities or an outside evaluator might have insight into the school issues is the rationale behind my consulting with the larger school community, including students, parents, and Elders.

Symbols Without Substance

Educational reform is a political process with both positive and negative implications:

> Political time lines are at variance with the time lines for educational reform. This difference often results in vague goals, unrealistic schedules, a preoccupation with symbols of reform (new legislation, task forces, commissions, and the like), and shifting priorities as political pressures ebb and flow. (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 746)

Sometimes external innovations were used to solve a specific problem for financial and politically expedient reasons. Whether or not there was follow-up or whether monies were properly deployed, innovators experienced career advancements, and there was the appearance that something was done. Under these circumstances political success was achieved.

Symbols are important, but they must be congruent with substance to have power. Fullan and Miles (1992) stated that reform efforts fail because "politics favors symbols over substance. Substantial change in practice requires a lot of hard work and clever work 'on the ground,' which is not the strong point of political players" (p. 747). So, as symbols of change maintain dominance over substantive change, cynicism develops about the change process, and people take efforts at change less seriously: "While we cannot have effective reform without symbols, we can easily have symbols with effective reform - the predominant experience of most educators and one that predisposes them to be skeptical about all reforms" (p. 747).

It was obvious that, given the political nature of everything surrounding the school in this community, politics would play an important part in the process. The band council would have the final say on any change and therefore had to be included as a part of the process. It was important that the legitimate political authority of the band council

be honored, but at the same time it would be necessary to allow the opinions of the community to be heard and to urge that changes be substantive and not merely symbolic.

Hasty Solutions

School reform efforts fail because "our attempts to solve problems are frequently superficial" (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 747). Fullan and Miles continued: "Superficial solutions, introduced quickly in an atmosphere of crisis, normally make matters worse. This problem is all the more serious now that we are tackling large-scale reforms, for the consequences of failure are much more serious" (p. 747). Political and administrative mandates that attempt to bring on changes in structure tend to be launched with undue thought and with unrealistic timelines.

Fullan and Miles (1992) discussed two examples of such political reforms. The first example involves statewide testing mandates that caused adverse teacher reactions at the local level. Because of the pressure to attain satisfactory achievement results, teachers responded with a crisis mentality by reducing instructional strategies, restricting the content of material taught, and narrowing the range of learning alternatives offered to students. The other example involves site-based management in contrast to centralized testing. The authors contended that other so-called innovations (e.g., mentoring, career ladders, competency requirements) have been pushed into place too quickly, with little thought for the possible consequences. There is no doubt that schools are under a great deal of pressure to reform. After all, reform is "big business, politically and economically" (p. 747).

> The temptation is great to latch on to the quick fix, to go along with the trend, to react uncritically to endorsed innovations as they come and go. Local educators experience most school reforms as fads.
>
> There are two underlying problems. One is that mistaken or superficial solutions are introduced; the other is that, even when the solution is on the right track, hasty implementation leads to failure. (p. 747)

Structural solutions are easy to implement with the right political will; however, if skill, commitment, and an ethic of hard work are absent, then the likelihood of successful reform is seriously unlikely. Of structural change, Fullan and Miles (1992) pointed out that

> changes in structure must go hand in hand with changes in culture and in the individual and collective capacity to work through new structures. Because education reform is so complex, we cannot know in advance exactly which new structures and behavioral patterns should go together or how they should mesh. But we do know that neglecting one or the other is a surefire recipe for failure. (p. 748)

This obviously applied to the community, where structural changes in the school such as the move from federal to local control had not been accompanied by a change in educational culture. Once again, this seemed the product of a lack of consensus among those involved—a failure to find change meaningful or to agree upon what was meant to change.

Reactionary Resistance

Efforts toward change rarely go as planned or as easily as we may think. These efforts involve people and, therefore, involve some resistance from those involved. This resistance is also known as "intransigence, entrenchment, fearfulness, reluctance to buy in, complacency, unwillingness to alter behaviors, and failure to recognize the need for change" (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 748). Teachers, staff members, and administrators

have been known to possess these traits. But it is unproductive to label such actions as resistance. They may point to real implementation problems such as a "lack of technical skills or having insufficient resources for change" (p. 748). Assigning blame and labeling individuals as intransigent does little to mobilize stakeholders to productive action:

> During transitions from a familiar to a new state of affairs, individuals must normally confront the loss of the old and commit themselves to the new, unlearn old beliefs and behaviors and learn new ones, and move from anxiousness and uncertainty to stabilization and coherence. Any significant change involves a period of intense personal and organizational learning and problem solving. People need supports for such work, not displays of impatience. (p. 748)

People involved in change need time "to assess the change for its genuine possibilities and for how it bears on their self-interest" (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 748). This period for reflection helps innovators to understand how the change process affects those involved on a personal level: "When resistance is misunderstood, we are immediately set on a self-defeating path. Reframing the legitimate basis of most forms of resistance will allow us to get a more productive start and to isolate the real problems of improvement" (p. 748).

I suspected that the need to reframe the nature of resistance to certain kinds of change in this community would prove helpful in reaching consensus. Reframing issues and concerns for clarification would be an important part of the facilitator's role in achieving shared meaning.

Patchwork Success Insufficient

Examples of successful reform in individual schools do exist, but only through the efforts of teachers, principals, and district support. These pockets of success have brought about changes in school practices. However, the durability of these successes is

questionable. There is sufficient reason to believe that these small pockets of success are not sustainable when school conditions change.

To sustain school reform takes great efforts from a single individual or group of committed individuals. But the success of these efforts can easily be lost if key individuals leave the school or the school district. Changes in district policies may also jeopardize reform efforts.

Local schools can be a hotbed of innovation as long as key innovators do not suffer burnout and as long as the support of district administrators (e.g., superintendent or/and other agencies) remains strong. There are other reasons for the failure of short-term reform efforts. Fullan and Miles (1992) stated, "The failure to institutionalize an innovation and build it into the normal structures and practices of the organization underlies the disappearance of many reforms" (p. 748).

It can be very discouraging to have worked hard over a long period of time to achieve small successes, only to see all efforts obliterated in a short time by unrelated events. Fullan and Miles (1992) were clear that

> it is not enough to achieve isolated pockets of success. Reform fails unless we can demonstrate that pockets of success add up to new structures, procedures, and school cultures that press for continuous improvement. So far there is little evidence. (p. 748)

This was certainly the case in the community school. There had been no lack of innovations over the years, and there had been many "pockets of success" that were often the result of the efforts of individual innovators. But these small successes did not add up to a successful school. My process would have to involve as many people as possible in a unified effort toward change.

Knowledge Misused

Finally, reform failure may be due "to a particular version of faulty maps: 'knowledge' of the change process is often cited as the authority for taking certain actions" (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 748). Statements such as "ownership is the key to reform," "lots of in-service training is required," "vision and leadership are critical," and "the school is the unit of change" are examples of what the authors described as "half truths." These statements, if taken literally, can be abused and misused. "Reform is systemic, and actions based on knowledge of the change process must be systemic, too" (p. 749). For success, important current knowledge must be linked to reform efforts during and after the change process.

Most authorities—political and administrative—quickly develop a vocabulary of what Fullan and Miles (1992) called half truths. It was critical that jargon not get in the way of the expression of real ideas in the community. The role of the facilitator would always be to seek clarity—to make sure that everyone involved in the process understood what was intended.

Stake's Responsive Evaluation Model

Of the standard models, I determined that the methodology proposed by Robert E. Stake (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) for his responsive evaluation model came closest to what I believed the community was seeking. This model involves teachers, administrators, students, parents, community members, program developers, and representatives of funding sources—"stakeholders"—in the evaluation process. The methodology and the data collected emphasize the language, context, and concerns of

everyone who will be affected by the outcome of the evaluation. Consensus is sought in aims and conclusions. The judgments of all stakeholders, including the evaluators themselves, are given equal weight.

Like other types of qualitative models, the responsive model stresses the continuous nature of the evaluation process, enabling feedback from stakeholders as early as possible in the process. Stake (1974) believed that we should be concerned with the language and interests of stakeholders. Time must be spent learning the needs of the people involved.

Stake's (1974) method calls for the following steps:

1. The person conducting the evaluation should talk to the participants and audience (stakeholders) to gain an understanding of the program from their perspective and the purposes of the evaluation.
2. Given the outcomes of conversations with stakeholders, the evaluator should set limits on the scope of the program and limits of inputs from other sources.
3. The evaluator should begin to discover the purposes of the project, both actual and stated, and the concerns of the stakeholders.
4. The evaluator should initiate conceptualization of problems and issues that the evaluation should address.
5. Once problems and issues have been identified, the evaluator should think about the design of the evaluation.
6. The evaluator should select the approaches needed to generate data. For Stake, this usually meant using the human being as the data-gathering instrument.
7. The evaluator should gather data using the chosen methods.

8. Once data are collected, the evaluator should go through a metamorphosis, becoming an information-processor (i.e., creating case studies and thick descriptions).
9. The evaluator should match the report format with the audience. A report may be discussed around a table, written, documented in a film, presented through the news media, or made available to the stakeholder audience in any of various other ways.
10. The evaluator should assemble formal reports, though Stake did not think that formal reports are necessary or desirable in every case.

Stake's (1974) model emphasizes the value perspectives of evaluators and the audience. He posited that different audiences would have different information needs because their differing values lead them to identify differing issues and concerns. The responsive evaluator is focused on the concerns and issues of audiences, which become "organizers" or the basis for evaluation design. This is a departure from previous models in which organizers involved objectives or *a priori* hypotheses. Stake also argued that traditional models using predetermined designs were completed at the *beginning* of the evaluation, whereas in his responsive evaluation model the evaluator must first determine the issues and concerns of the stakeholders and observe their activities before steps can be taken to design and mount the evaluation. Responsive evaluation is emergent and continuously evolving. It is never *complete*; closure comes only when finally dictated by resources and logistics. This has implications for the role of the evaluator. In responsive evaluation the evaluator is stimulated by the participants' program activities and is drawn into the evaluation as a full partner during the evaluation period. Stake stressed the

importance of negotiation and interaction to identify issues and concerns of the stakeholders. When a draft of the report is completed, testing is done with a representative group of audience members. If the portrayal is challenged, then the evaluator must return to the field to collect additional data. Stake envisioned the responsive evaluators as being in constant contact with their stakeholders or audiences, providing them with cues about their activities, insights, and interpretations. The final report, he believed, should not come as a surprise to anyone.

Stake's (1974) model involves all participants in a meaningful way by constantly giving feedback, questioning knowledge, forming perceptions, and reaching consensus. Unfortunately, he placed a great deal of responsibility on the evaluator as to the identification of the problem and design of the evaluation, much like previous evaluators had in this community. These efforts had not been successful. My hope was that the participants could take more of an active role in this part of the process, owning it. The continuous nature of Stake's concept of this feedback and data collection I thought to be very appropriate. I felt it necessary to provide a composite solution.

Fieldwork of this nature demands naturalistic approaches to research and was the most appropriate launching point for this study. In action research, the focus becomes the community members' claims and issues. Hence, the plan of the study was conceptualized on the information that I had already gathered from my exposure to community traditions and action research. This approach means that the model, although based on a predetermined foundation, is continually evolving.

Using these methods to help them build consensus on their goals and ways to achieve them among the stakeholders in this community would, I hope, foster in them the

sustainable skills of negotiation, communication, leadership, and accountability needed to maintain the process of change in their school long after the conclusion of my study. It is easy to identify problems piecemeal; it is another thing to reach a harmonized design to meet complex and ongoing challenges. Empowering the community to continuously evaluate challenges as they arise would be an achievement of lasting value and would be, I feel, in harmony with their traditional method of reaching sage counsel among Elders and community members.

CHAPTER 3

A GATHERING CIRCLES METHODOLOGY

I approached this research from within a critical social theory orientation using qualitative methods. Much of my chosen methodology was drawn specifically from participatory research perspectives—action research and emancipatory learning—to develop a process relevant to the problems and circumstances of the community undertaking an examination of its school.

In this chapter I first outline emancipatory learning and then discuss some of the literature pertaining to action research—particularly the work of Stake (1974) and Stringer (1996)—and its application to the development of my data-gathering process for this study. I also outline the methodology of "gathering circles"—the name I gave to the process I developed.

Emancipatory Learning

Central to the notion of community-based action research, especially when enacted with those who are seen as disadvantaged or powerless, is the concept of emancipatory learning. Emancipatory learning had its origin in 19th-century Britain in important struggles for education for the poor, the procurement of the vote for women, and the labor movement. Emancipatory learning concerns itself with developing understanding and knowledge about the nature and root causes of unsatisfactory circumstances in order to develop strategies to change them. It arises through solidarity (collaboration) among those who are oppressed by a given unsatisfactory circumstance. The aim of emancipatory learning is the discovery of realistic strategies to improve the

circumstances of oppressed persons. Action research is a primary method of initiating emancipatory learning by consultation and reflection upon the problem and desired goals.

Emancipatory learning distinguishes two types of knowledge: the merely useful and the really useful (Johnson, 1979). Merely useful information is information that maintains oppressed people in a state of powerlessness. Examples of merely useful knowledge would be "keep your head down; don't make waves" or "women are not responsible enough to vote in elections." Such knowledge might have been widespread at any given time and might have been considered "common sense" by a majority of people, even those who are oppressed by that knowledge. It is easy to see how such "knowledge" serves to conserve the privilege of one class of persons (e.g., voting men) at the expense of another class of persons (women who cannot vote). *Really* useful knowledge is knowledge, arrived at through reflection upon the realities of a circumstance, that reveals the distortions and injustices inherent in mere useful knowledge. Really useful knowledge disrupts/dispels the illusion that merely useful knowledge has a superior authority over the life of individuals and classes of persons. An example of really useful knowledge would be "women are intelligent, responsible human beings who deserve equal representation in government." This knowledge, the product of reflection and reason, quickly reveals the ludicrous and unexamined nature of the merely useful knowledge that women are not responsible enough to vote. Emancipatory learning is reflection towards action.

It might be said that the community and its school system were oppressed by an unsatisfactory circumstance vis-à-vis the education of their children. High failure and dropout rates are completely unsatisfactory. Previous studies generated only merely

useful knowledge, given that those evaluations did not lead to a change in the unsatisfactory status quo. As Heron (1981) pointed out, researching people gives power to the researcher, not the researched. The purpose of emancipatory learning through action research in this study was to uncover those self-defeating pieces of merely useful knowledge that helped maintain the unsatisfactory status quo in the local school system, and to replace that merely useful knowledge with really useful knowledge; that is to say, community-generated solutions to its problems.

The Community-Based Action Research Process

Inquiry has as its aim improvement of the human condition. In its best form it also allows the participants to be aware of what is important in life to them. Unfortunately this involves participation and action, something that is not easy to create amongst a group. Community-based action research begins with a problem that needs to be solved. Its purpose is not to develop generalizable knowledge but

> to build collaboratively constructed descriptions and interpretations of events that enable groups of people to formulate mutually acceptable solutions to their problems. Community-based research, however, recognizes that any research process has multiple outcomes and takes into account the need to enact ways of working that protect or enhance the dignity and identities of all people involved. It is oriented toward ways of organizing and enacting professional and community life that are democratic, equitable, liberating, and life enhancing. (Stringer, 1996, p. 143)

According to Stringer (1996), action research is inquiry that takes into account the historical, cultural, interactional, and emotional context of the community. It is an approach to investigation that attempts to nurture and empower the strengths and

sensibilities of the community. Community-based action research is accessible to both professional practitioners and laypersons and is

> a collaborative approach to *inquiry* or *investigation* that provides people with the means to take systematic *action* to resolve specific problems. This approach to research favors consensual and participatory procedures that enable people (a) to investigate systematically their problems and issues, (b) to formulate powerful and sophisticated accounts of their situations, and (c) to devise plans to deal with the problems at hand. (p. 15)

Similar to concerned and thoughtful teachers' reflecting on their daily teaching practice, action research "is designed to improve the work of schooling" (Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, & Richert, 1997, pp. 86-87):

> Teachers, administrators, and other adults who are part of the school community can come together as a community of learners to examine their work in systematic ways and to draw from this examination a plan for subsequent action. This direct connection between inquiry and action is one factor that distinguishes teacher research from other research in education. (p. 87)

This direction connection between inquiry and action is "a powerful learning opportunity for participants" (p. 187).

These participants in the school community talk together, work together, solve problems together, and learn together. The actual work of their collaborative conversations takes a variety of forms within the research process. Sometimes teachers examine various aspects of the same problem and contribute their data and analysis to the larger goal. At other times, teachers work together on the same problem, analyzing the same evidence, capitalizing on the different lenses that the different researchers bring. Because of the learning community created when action researchers work together, the process is also an important locus for school reform (p. 187).

Through action research, communities may not only define their problems, but also examine them together in systematic ways, with the goal of school reform through informed empowerment. Learning by teaching and learning by leading, and actualizing the power of a learning community to initiate a course of meaningful and informed change are the main aims of the action research process. Working together fosters confidence in participants by increasing their knowledge of the process of change.

It might be said that action research builds the strength needed for action by the very act of considering the issues at hand and, collectively, by individually examining the nature of those undertaking the examination. It is, in fact, a collective and individual self-examination. Participants examine questions that are important to them as individuals and as a community. In the process of examining these questions, they come to better understand themselves and the issues. They learn to construct firm knowledge from what were often before only vague desires or half-realized ideas of how things might be in a more perfect world. These emerging structures of knowledge imbue the participants with a growing sense of the power of their ideas. As they share their questions, insights, ideas, knowledge, expertise, and energies with other participants in the search for answers, leadership is shared and the power of collaborative effort emerges.

"Community-based action research is always enacted through an explicit set of social values" (Stringer, 1996, p. 9). According to Stringer, within a social context, community-based action research has the following characteristics: It is democratic, enabling the participation of all people. It is equitable, acknowledging the equal worth of all persons. It is liberating, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions. It is life enhancing, enabling individuals to express their full human potential.

The basic assumption of community-based action research is that everyone affected by a problem should be involved in the investigative processes. According to Stringer (1996), stakeholders should collect information and reflect upon that information to extend their knowledge of the problem. New knowledge is used to devise a resolution for the problem, which in turn provides the context for testing hypotheses derived from group theorizing. This collaborative approach helps stakeholders, professionals, experts, and lay people to

> develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of the problems and issues that confront them. As they rigorously explore and reflect on their situation together, they can repudiate social myths, misconceptions, and misinterpretations and formulate more constructive analyses of their situation. By sharing their diverse knowledge and experience—expert, professional, and lay—stakeholders can create solutions to their problems and, in the process, improve the quality of their community life. (p. 10)

Stringer (1996) went on to note that the researcher's role in the action research process should be facilitative rather than directive. Gaining new knowledge must be a collaborative process which engages community members in the process of defining and redefining understandings of community life.

As they collectively investigate their own situation, stakeholders build a consensual vision of their life-world. Community-based action research results not only in a collective vision, but also in a sense of community. It operates at the intellectual level as well as at social, cultural, political, and emotional levels (Stringer, 1996, p. 10).

Action research can be defined as self-reflective inquiry that involves the engagement of participants in the improvement of practices and in their understanding of

those practices and of the institutions in which these practices are undertaken. According to McNiff (1988):

> The social basis of action research is involvement; the educational basis is improvement. Its operations demand changes. Action research means ACTION, both of the system under consideration, and of the people involved in that system. The action of action research, whether on a small or large scale, implies change in people's lives, and therefore in the system in which they live. (p. 3)

Essentially, action research involves working together to improve everyday practice. As McNiff (1988) pointed out, "It is research WITH, rather than research ON" (p. 4). Participants in action research are encouraged to be adventurous, take risks, and develop their own theories of praxis that work for them.

Method

Five aspects are crucial to action research: the systematic recycling of research, reflection, and action; the importance of the sociocultural context; the role of the researcher; the collaborative nature of the interaction; and the use of consensus for decision making (Stringer, 1996). The systematic recycling provides validity by checking, cross checking, and validating the understanding of meanings. By reflecting on the concerns and taking action on them, the process becomes active. The community is a microcosm and has its own sociocultural context. The researcher must be a collaborative leader providing empowerment to the participants, giving voice to their concerns, and allowing them to come to their own solutions. Action research follows an "elegant self-reflective spiral of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning" (McNiff, 1988, p. 7). Like McNiff, Stringer (1996) viewed action research as "a continually recycling set of activities" (p. 17). Others (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) presented

action research as a spiral of activity along the lines of plan, act, observe, and reflect. Though terminologies differ, these authorities were essentially describing the same process of research, reflection, and action. It is a given that the process of action research will always take the form of a hermeneutic circle or spiral.

Not everyone will enter a circle at the same point each time; nor will participants always proceed step by step from beginning to end. They might find themselves working backwards, repeating processes, rethinking interpretations, or moving from one stage to another following the natural logical path demanded by the situation. Action research will rarely prove to be a stately waltz following well-mapped steps. Courting new understanding through reflection can be a surprising and sometimes tortuous dance, an exotic rumba full of movements back and forth. At times action researchers may find that they are not leading the dance at all, but if they are wise, they will be assiduous in learning the new and unsuspected rhythms revealed by intuitive forces made conscious through the process. In the heat of creative exploration, the researcher's task is to observe carefully and always to firmly and gently guide the energy of the research back toward the center of the relevant problem and its solution. However wild the dance may become, it must be kept on the chosen dance floor. I found that I was able to keep a spiral process of activity throughout the research. In fact, the process seemed to take on a life of its own. Meetings were as long as they needed to be; the participants discussed items when I was not present; they recruited people to take part, obviously discussing the process—the gathering circles spawning other circles.

Stringer (1996) made the point that, unless action research procedures are "enacted in ways that take into account the social, cultural, interactional, and emotional

factors that affect all human activity" (p. 17), they will not be effective. The researcher needs to "construct systematically a picture of the situation in which he or she is working in order to locate the individuals and groups with whom he or she will work and to formulate a preliminary understanding of their situation" (p. 40). In this research project I was already familiar with the community and its members. I had a working knowledge of its politics and customs, and this knowledge was of inestimable benefit to my research. Due to my preexisting knowledge in the community, it was sometimes difficult to attempt to distance myself from situations as they arose. As an informed friend of the community, I was comfortable in many roles, from working with the Elders to talking with the teacher aides. My connections with everyone from the Chief to the caretaker were invaluable. I always felt free to move from one group to another, with none of them appearing to be wary of my alliances and allegiances.

In community-based action research the role of the researcher takes on a dramatic change compared to the traditional research role. The researcher is no longer the expert *doing* research, but rather is a resource person. The practitioner-researcher's role becomes one of providing leadership and direction to community members. Stringer (1996) called them both researchers and research facilitators and pointed out that all those involved as stakeholders can rightfully be called researchers.

Facilitators help practitioners hone their investigative skills so that they might develop effective solutions to school (or community) problems that impact on "the quality of their professional lives" (Stringer, 1996, p. xviii). It was clear that, if I were to follow this methodology in the course of my research, I had to become a "catalyst to

assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and to support them as they work toward effective solutions to the issues that concern them" (p. 22).

Stringer (1996) raised an interesting duality when discussing the collaborative and noncompetitive aspects of action research:

> Community-based action research seeks to change the social and personal dynamics of the research situation so that it is noncompetitive and nonexploitative and enhances the lives of all those who participate. This collaborative approach to inquiry seeks to build positive working relationships and productive interactional and communicative styles. Its intent is to provide a climate that enables disparate groups of people to work harmoniously and productively to achieve their various goals. (p. 19)

Action research, according to Stringer (1996), may appear to be somewhat idealistic given

> the competitive social values, impersonal work practices, and authoritarian modes of control [that] impose themselves as constant conditions of our work. Institutionalized practices—those commonly accepted as 'the way things are done'—seem so pervasive and normal that we often cannot envisage any other ways of working, even when those practices are ineffective or, in some cases, detrimental to our purposes. (p. 143)

He stated that the mere acts of observing and reflecting on our daily practices can be revealing and enable "us to see ourselves more clearly and to formulate ways of working that are more effective and that enhance the lives of the people with whom we work" (p. 143). In this study I asked community members to step back to question and reflect critically on past and current school practices, and to challenge the ways that they viewed their school. Many found this process more challenging than they had realized—frequently being removed from their familiar comfort zones and alliances and discovering that change could be effected within the system and community.

Community-based action research is fundamentally based on consensus. It assumes that cooperation and consensus making should be primary. It seeks to link groups that potentially are in conflict so that they may attain effective solutions through dialogue and negotiation. From Stake's (1974) evaluation model I chose those aspects of communication, consultation, reiteration, negotiation, and meaning checking required to build consensus among research participants. In addition, I developed a group process built on traditional Native decision making.

Consensus and Silence in the Community

Traditionally, the members of this indigenous community have worked together to come to consensus when they have had decisions to make. The ancient practices of the talking circle and consulting Elders for advice have continued to this day. The local residents call this *tauci bare gihnamid*, "everyone putting their minds together." Even though this method of internal consultation and consensus has always worked for the community in the past, and though they continue to follow this tradition, it does not appear to have been taken into consideration by prior evaluations of their local school system. Combining the best of action research methods with *tauci bare gihnamid* provided an evaluative tool with the potential of being meaningful in meeting the needs of both the community and of the educational system. This was my motivation for adopting the process that I named *gathering circles*.

And yet, *tauci bare gihnamid* notwithstanding, I found trepidation in the community when it came to speaking about issues. Many factors favored silence, which was often the price of peace within families where generational and political rifts

frequently occurred. Political partisanship, which normally fractured along family lines, often severed communications between clans. And in a system in which the squeaky wheel was often not greased, but rather summarily replaced, teachers and administrators feared for their jobs if they spoke out. In the evolution of a new collaborative decision-making process for this community, their reticence to speak openly required the inclusion of extra compensatory steps to allow for a certain degree of anonymity for the participants.

Forming Gathering Circles

From past experience in First Nations communities, I well remembered the negative results of situations in which outsiders arrived to tell the people what should be done or how they should be doing it. Therefore I was motivated to develop a more relevant process for this community, one that could help the people provide their own solutions.

Initially, I had no idea of how to interview members of the community. At an early meeting with a number of community members, I was told about an infamous and traumatic incident in which a community member was publicly humiliated while speaking in a large community forum. It was clear that many people on the reserve feared a repetition of this incident and were not comfortable speaking freely about community problems in public. In order to enable members to speak more freely, I decided to organize peer groupings—groups of people of approximately equal power and position in the community who shared similar interests. Stringer (1996, p. 69) called these peer groupings *intragroups*, in contrast to the *intergroups*, which would consist of

representatives of the whole community. This decision to consult intragroups was first made pertaining specifically to school staff, given the sensitivity to the system. I separated teachers, support staff, and caretakers into three groups. It was soon obvious that intragroup meetings would also be a profitable approach throughout the community to facilitate a greater comfort level for participants who might have been reluctant to speak freely about issues in front of other persons perceived to be outside the speaker's peer group—though it also became clear to me that my approach would have to be tailored somewhat to each different group.

Intergroup gatherings permitted diverse community groups to meet to discuss and formulate joint constructions that were arrived at within intragroups. I found very early on in the research project that frequent intergroup meetings in the community would be difficult to organize because of conflicting work schedules and finding suitable times and places. In the end, there were only two intergroup gatherings during the study, each involving the school board, Elders, and some general members of the community who gathered to discuss the list of resolutions developed by the various gathering circles.

My initial intention was to set up separate gathering circles with parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, the school board (the Chief and council), community Elders, students, social and health care workers, and members of the adult upgrading program. These would be based on standard open-ended interview protocols and electronically recorded. The name gathering circle was chosen for several reasons. Historically, when important decisions about the welfare of the community had to be made, Elders and community members would meet in gatherings to discuss, debate, and reach consensus as to what course and direction to take; and, as in many traditions, the circle is a sacred form in this

community's traditional culture. The terminology was chosen to consciously associate this process with that tradition.

Figure 1 demonstrates the full process flow of gathering circles in this community, along with the potential for their continuing use in the future. The design was planned as a foundation in consultation with my primary gatekeeper, my supervisor. It actually proved to be fairly accurate, with the addition of the continuing spiral of gathering circles that evolved from this process.

The process of issue resolution by means of gathering circles required roughly nine steps, though some of the intermediary steps (for instance, meaning checks and consensus building) were repeated more than once.

1. I facilitiated the first session of each group's gathering circle, developing a prioritized list of issues important to the group. Participants were reassured of their anonymity in the final report of my research, and the process was reviewed.
2. Transcription of the first session with an accompanying resolution sheet was prepared for the next meeting.
3. Prior to the next meeting, the resolution sheet was distributed among all members of the group and was discussed at the beginning of the meeting to check for understanding.

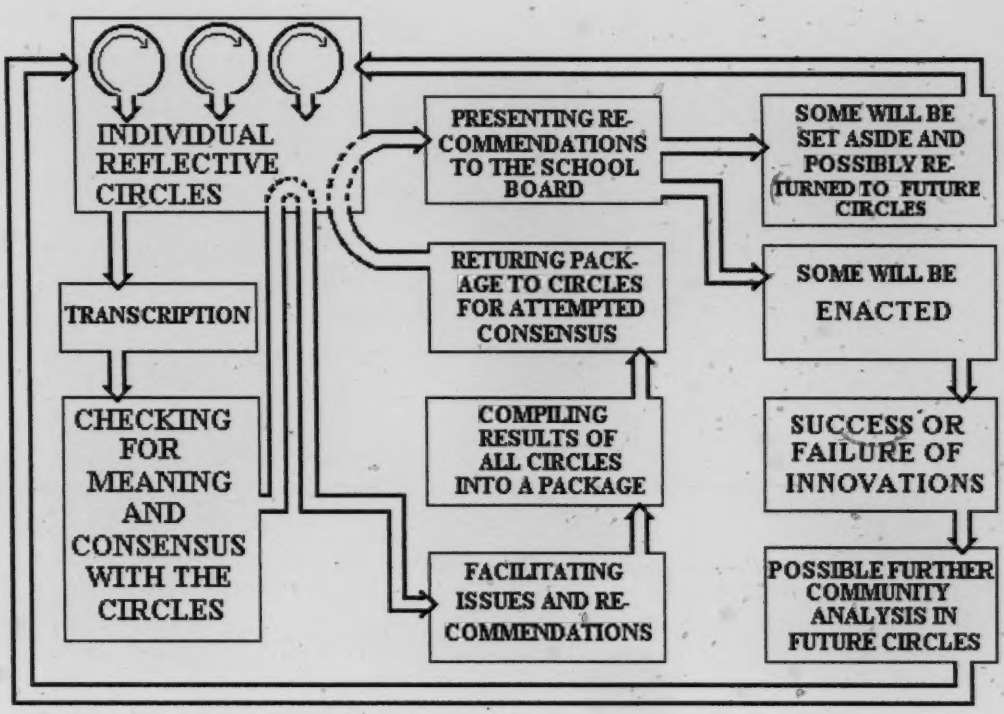
INDIVIDUAL REFLECTIVE CIRCLES
TRANSCRIPTION
CHECKING FOR MEANING AND CONSENSUS WITH THE CIRCLES
PRESENTING RE-COMMENDATIONS TO THE SCHOOL BOARD
RETURING PACK-AGE TO CIRCLES FOR ATTEMPTED CONSENSUS
COMPILING RESULTS OF ALL CIRCLES INTO A PACKAGE
FACILITATING ISSUES AND RE-COMMENDATIONS
SOME WILL BE SET ASIDE AND POSSIBLY RE-TURNED TO FUTURE CIRCLES
SOME WILL BE ENACTED
SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF INNOVATIONS
POSSIBLE FURTHER COMMUNITY ANALYSIS IN FUTURE CIRCLES

Figure 1. Conceptualization of the process.

4. One by one, issues were worked through and consensus on resolutions achieved.
5. Claims (statements identifying what is good and successful in the system under consideration) were then discussed. These not only identified successes, but also served as almost a reward for the participants because they could reflect on what was good within the school. It was a much more enjoyable process for them than the task of building the resolutions.

6. Once the issues of all groups had been resolved within their respective groups, the issues and resolutions were compiled into one package and provided to all the groups, whereby community-wide consensus was attempted and achieved. The final consensus package was presented to the school board with Elders present, as well as community representatives.
7. Some recommendations were acted upon; others were set aside by the board. Those recommendations that were set aside may be returned to gathering circles in the future for modification, re-consensus and re-presentation, along with new issues and recommended solutions.
8. Recommendations that have been enacted can be expected either to succeed or fail to meet the expectations of the community.
9. These successes and failures may be analysed by the community in future gathering circles in an ongoing process of evaluation and innovation.

In the future one could expect a regathering of circles, new consensus, new or amended recommendations put to the board, and an overall continuation of the process as the community hones its goals and rises to meet new and as yet unseen challenges in the years ahead. Longevity of the process will be the ultimate test of its usefulness to the community, the school, and the school board. I expect that if the process fails to produce the desired results, the community will either abandon it or attempt to modify the process to meet its needs. To be effective in the face of change, the process must be flexible.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Limitations

Going into the research, I believed that the major strengths of my chosen orientation lay in its ability to ascertain the values and beliefs of the community, to build on the inherent strengths of the people and their traditions, and to take into account their unique context and their concerns and hopes for the future, which, under a standard empirical evaluation, would be indiscernible. Its major weakness, I thought, was that my own unconscious biases might inadvertently sway the proceedings, that I might fail to see the potential of the participants' contributions, that I might not have the patience to allow participants to express their views in their own way, or that I might impose a Western frame of reference on what they were trying to tell me.

To build on the strengths and minimize my own limitations, and also to recognize the diversity of talents and experience within the community, I organized members of key groups into gathering circles, based on the First Nations tradition of talking circles. This approach is multidisciplinary—or (following Scriven, 1991, p. 1) transdisciplinary—bringing an array of tools, talents, experiences, and disciplines to the process to afford a wider range of input and possibilities for shared understanding. By building a community consensus of their needs through reflection and consultation among themselves, action research had the potential to empower this community to initiate and maintain a process of change toward its uniquely defined aspirations for its school and for its children's futures.

I was conscious that my position as a non-Native researcher and former principal with a history in the community affected how people saw me, influenced my interaction with them, and may have contributed to overlooking certain possibilities that a Native

person might have seen. However, questions of researcher bias are answered, I believe, by reflexivity—that is, by scrupulous self-review through journals, field notes, and reflective writings and by peer review. To avoid unconscious persuasion of the participants to my viewpoint, I have followed the process of the talking circle carefully, listening, being aware of those who wished to speak, and speaking as seldom as possible myself. My job was to listen, record, and clarify by mirroring back to the participants what I heard them saying, and then asking if my perception was correct. I meticulously recorded in my journals and logs everything concerning my research, returned frequently to the people I wished to understand, and interacted with them in a respectful manner.

The researcher must proceed with faith in the good intentions of research participants, and, through continuous checks of meaning, the researcher will detect misunderstandings and even unconscious motivations that must be clarified. As Shakespeare wrote in *Henry VIII*, "Truth loves open dealing." I hoped as I entered into my research that the nature of my chosen methodology would facilitate communication and consensus between groups within the community and foster an openness in which a transparency and democracy of ideas could flourish.

I was limited in this study by my own skills and experience. I have been, to the best of my knowledge and ability, open and honest, especially concerning my own views; and I hope that I have been receptive to criticism from my peers, colleagues, and, in particular, the community. Only in this way could I hope to understand and convey the community's understandings and beliefs, and particularly their values concerning the education of their children. To achieve relevance in my research, I continually searched for ever more informed constructions.

Toward Constructing a Relevant Research Methodology

> It is only by individuals taking action to alter their own environments that there is any chance for deep change. The 'system' will not, indeed cannot, do us any favors. If anything, the educational system is killing itself because it is more designed for the status quo while facing societal expectations of major reform. (Fullan, 1993; as cited in Lambert et al., 1997, p. 33)

This research study concerns the process adopted by a community of people who chose to critically examine their own school and educational system. To undertake such an investigation, I adopted the principles of action research. Below I discuss, in a nonlinear way, my understanding of the action research process and my applied method of using action research in this research. I have framed that discussion within concerns for trustworthiness and credibility.

Issues of Trustworthiness and Credibility

Beginning with my research plans, I developed strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of my data and of the process itself. In participatory action research, consensus is one of the most important measures for trustworthiness of the information. During circle discussions not only was the content discussed, but the process itself was also open for comment, and I made every effort to be inclusive and participatory and to have the group take ownership of the proceedings. The participants were asked frequently to review the process and identify any issues that needed to be resolved.

After each initial gathering circle, I always met with one or two members of the group to invite their responses to the process. I taped and transcribed the sessions and met with my gatekeepers and my supervisor to discuss the process.

Following the conclusion of the project, I selected 10 members of the gathering circles and asked the participants to reflect on the experience and discuss what the experience meant to them. The only groups who were not reconsulted were the Elders and the Chief and council. The Elders are a protected group with multiple requirements for ceremonies and so on, and it was difficult to have more than the three sessions I accomplished with them. The Chief and council were almost impossible to get together as a group, and I tended to work with them individually, other than at the two school board meetings. This provided further information about the utility of the process.

From the outset I recognized the possibility that some community members would hope that my research would support or prove their personal opinions. It would have been naïve to suppose that my research would avoid contact with political divisions in the community. I knew I would be interviewing partisans of one side or another during the course of my research. However, as Weiss (1972) commented:

> Using research to support a predetermined position is research utilization, too. . . . Just because sides have already been taken is no reason to discount the effects of the research. . . . What research can do is add strength to the side that the evidence supports. . . . Since the research finds ready made partisans who will fight for its implementation, it stands a better chance of making a difference in the outcome. . . . When research is available to each participant group, research as political ammunition can serve a worthy purpose. (p. 15)

If Weiss was correct, the initial motivation in the community's request for my participation in this research was irrelevant to the execution of the study as long as the research itself was conducted in a rigorous and ethical manner. As Rose (1977) indicated, "A public official views knowledge or information as a means to an end, whereas a social scientist views it as an end in itself" (p. 26). With research comes deeper understandings

that, with patient and determined application, will lead to appropriate resolutions of the research question. I also hoped that in a case in which the welfare of the community's children was concerned, the political self-interest of partisans might be set aside.

CHAPTER 4

THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The First Nations reserve that was the setting of this study measured some 26 square miles. A Catholic church, the band office, a health centre, a school, a fire hall, a senior citizens' home, the former day school, a store and gas bar, and a community hall formed the main town site. Some of the town's buildings were quite new, whereas others, such as the former day school, were old and somewhat dilapidated. There was also a large building that housed the day care centre.

The First Nations band office was the administrative centre of the reserve. From there the Chief and council made all decisions affecting the welfare of the community. Social Services, Child Welfare, the Recreation Department, and Community Education (Employment and Development) also had offices there. It was the hub of all local public life.

The health centre provided all the community's medical care, including drug and alcohol abuse programs. Employees of this facility included a program director, a nurse, three community health workers, a physiotherapist, a dental therapist, an adult counsellor, and a psychologist. A physician and a dentist made regular visits to the community.

Approximately 1,250 people lived in the community. Most members of the community were Roman Catholics. Approximately 500 were adults, and 389 were over the age of 21 and able to vote. There were approximately 750 children in the community. Elders formed a small but highly significant portion of the population. Elders are defined as persons who are held in special esteem for their wisdom and who are called upon for

guidance in personal and community affairs. Not all senior citizens are considered Elders. At the time of my study, out of the general population of seniors, I estimated, with the help of my gatekeeper, that there were about 35 Elders. About 27 of those were "active"—that is to say, Elders who are able to attend public meetings and play an active role in guiding the people.

At any given time, approximately 90% of the population of the reserve were on some form of social assistance. According to the 1996 Canadian census (the latest available figures in 2003), 18% of the local population had less than a Grade 9 education, and 49% of the adults (persons over the age of 15) had completed some level of education between Grades 9 and 13. But 90% of all adults were found to be lacking a secondary school certificate. Only 55% of secondary school graduates had pursued some form of higher education or training, and 33% of these had not completed the program. Only 4% of the secondary school graduates, or those who had acquired a GED (General Education Development), had attained a postsecondary trade certificate or diploma. Seven percent of adults had attended at least one university course, but as of 1996 none of them had earned a degree. One graduate currently had a BEd. Why students in this community did not stay in school was a question ranging across all levels of education. Given the high dropout rate and unemployment in the community, it would appear that past attempts to assimilate Native children into a Western-modeled school education had not been effective. This feeling was certainly widespread among the people.

The school, perhaps the most notable piece of architecture in the community, combining traditional Native motifs with modern design, was built in 1990 and was expanded in 1995. It housed kindergarten through Grade 12 students in three wings: K-6

in one, 7-9 in another, and 10-12 in the newest section of the school. In spite of expansion, the teachers considered the size of the school inadequate. Storage space was at a premium. There were also two portable classrooms in use, and some high school classes were held at an adult training centre elsewhere in the community. In October 1999, the year of my study, 241 students were enrolled in the school. Approximately 70 children did not attend there, but were bussed daily to schools in surrounding communities.

The Oral Tradition

The First Nations community focused on in this study was rooted in an oral tradition. In the past, Elders were responsible for passing the culture and language to the children. An independent company's educational survey in 1983 expressed the fear that the oral Native language, used for centuries within the settlement but lacking a character set and written literature, would be lost with the death of the then current generation of Elders. Years of suppression had been almost successful in destroying this rich lingual heritage and its concomitant culture. To this day, language remains a contentious issue within the school and community. Many community members considered it a priority to develop a preservation method for their language. Indeed, one of the major reasons frequently cited for the assumption of control over the local educational program was the preservation and continuation of the community's language for future generations. On the other hand, some parents felt that their children were losing ground by spending classroom time preserving the Native tongue. For them, English meant jobs and the potential for a life outside the community.

It was clear that consensus concerning such matters had to be attempted among parents and community members if educational success were to be achieved, and, most important, the different groups had to be provided the opportunity to present their concerns and to know they were being heard. If a new, community-based process were to be successful, this time the community members would have to be encouraged to become passionate participants in their educational system. Parental involvement is essential to the success of most educational programs. Native control of the community school had been a step towards increasing parental involvement. The Native-controlled community school was not the alien entity that the old federal school had been, but obviously more was needed to integrate full community involvement into the educational system.

Politics and Support Networks

In any community there are support networks. This small community was no different. Political support tended to follow family (clan) ties. For example, immediate and extended families (cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents) typically profess the same allegiances. Although not always true, the majority of a family would often follow the political opinions of an Elder kinsman or kinswoman.

Elections could be a time of great community uncertainty: a frenzy of campaign promises, and partying. There could be a great deal of mistrust among clan members. If the lines of loyalty were clearly drawn, then clans could decide the winner of an election, but clan loyalties could shift from one political candidate to another. A shift in allegiance could be affected by political favors and promises made during the course of an election campaign. The balloting process itself could be controversial, and mistrust and anger

have erupted when election results are close. Sit-ins were not uncommon when the results of a race were inconclusive and tensions were high.

Community elections often meant difficult times for the school. Tension in the community usually meant high student absenteeism and a rise in discipline problems. There could be an abrupt change following a community election, and the transition period might not be smooth. Those in power often felt obligated to supporters and family members. Under such circumstances, new managers and band employees were common. Because employment is limited, a promise of a job in any of the band-controlled institutions became an important bargaining tool for would-be leaders, making even the humblest position on the school support staff a potential political appointment.

In this community two distinct groups could be identified—traditionalists and religionists. The religious group, with a strong adherence to conservative Catholic preferences, abjured traditional Native trappings (such as sweetgrass ceremonies) that traditionalists upheld as essential to maintaining the integrity of their culture. It was rare to find community members with no declared allegiance to either group.

The Prelude to the Study

My association with this community began in 1987 when I became the principal of "the old federal school" (as the community now refers to it). At that time the school had fewer than 50 students and was under the control of the federal DIAND. It was generally looked upon as a foreign entity in the community. Parents frequently complained that the school was not their own.

Three years later (1990), under a federal mandate supporting local control of schools in First Nations communities, the Chief and band council assumed the management of education on the reserve. A Director of Education was appointed, and a new school was constructed.

Enrolment in the new school quickly soared to over 200 students, with a staff of approximately 30 persons, including the Director of Education, the Director's assistant, an accountant, teachers, principal, vice principal, paraprofessionals, lunch cooks, a secretary, teachers' aides, and caretakers. I continued as principal in the new school, a position I held until August 1992, when I left for full-time graduate studies.

In the autumn of that same year the band council undertook an evaluation of the school. After some controversy, a professional evaluation team was hired. When word of the impending evaluation reached me, I asked for permission to study the evaluation process as a part of my course of studies. I had previously been involved with evaluations under the federal system, and I was interested in seeing how a local evaluation of a band-controlled school would be conducted.

I had some misgivings that having been the principal of this community's school was potentially damaging for my proposed graduate-level research. After much discussion with the Chief, I decided that I was able to define my role as one of informed advocacy, an informed friend of the community. I felt that there was a great deal to learn from the experience of those involved in local control and their desire to achieve a measurement of their accomplishments. Furthermore, I knew the people in the community and was held in generally positive regard, which I thought increased the likelihood of their confidence in me and their willingness to participate in my study.

Following ethics approval, my initial research began in the spring of 1992 while I was still principal. The reserve was suffering the aftermath of a bitter local election. The two weeks leading up to the election had greatly affected the lives of the school children, and attendance had dropped dramatically. Drunkenness increased among the adults of the community. All-night campaign parties were frequent. A ferment of mud slinging and election promises bubbled over into every aspect of life on the reserve. Tensions were high, and in the furore and excitement of the campaign, the children were simply forgotten.

Earlier that year an adult peer support group had sprung up in the community. Meeting weekly in the church, it became known as the Prayer Group. Swelling to over 100 members as the election approached, the group formed a substantial political block with the express purpose of defeating the incumbent Chief, who had held office for 20 years. The Prayer Group backed the Chief's one-time ally and now bitter political rival, a charismatic candidate who seemed devoted to political and social reform on the reserve.

Shortly before election day, the Chief held a gathering for his supporters. Soon after, complaints reached me from a member of the Prayer Group that children at the party had had access to alcohol and had been seen drunk. The Chief was said to be very upset to learn that his opponents were using that sort of information against him.

To make matters worse, just around that time a school employee, then temporarily on leave to campaign for the Chief, had arrived drunk at the school. Though this person *was* on leave at the time, word quickly spread among the Prayer Group that this instructor had been teaching while intoxicated. This person resigned shortly after the incident.

The election proved to be a tight race; the Chief was narrowly re-elected. Though they succeeded in electing several of their own candidates to council, members of the Prayer Group were bitterly disappointed at not unseating the Chief. Their disappointment led them to stage a sit-in at the Band Office the following day and to demand, among other things, that the band finances be made public. They insisted that there had been wrongdoing and fiscal mismanagement on the part of the previous council, many of whose members continued to sit on the new council. Far from diffusing tensions on the reserve, the results of the election had caused even greater acrimony on both sides. The defeat of their charismatic candidate led to an overwhelming sense of loss for many members of the Prayer Group. "I am still reeling from the shock of it," one of them would admit to me months later. "I am still grieving. . . . We had . . . the most awesome leader we had ever had. . . . He was making a lot of changes."

When the next teachers' pay day arrived, the protesters occupying the Band Office refused to allow cheques to be cut until their demands were met. After a full day of negotiation, they finally allowed the teachers to be paid. That night the protesters took their demonstration to the media. In the meantime, attendance at the school remained poor. Members of the Prayer Group began pulling their children from class, citing threatening phone calls. A teacher's aide was fired for her alleged involvement with the sit-in group.

It was at the end of this eventful week of protest that I had proposed to distribute Community Success questionnaires to members of the school community. Distribution of the questionnaire would mark the tentative beginning of my study. In the bitter postelection atmosphere, I wondered whether some parents would refuse to complete

their questionnaires in protest, or whether they might answer the questions maliciously to spoil the results of the study. And how would the members of the band council (who also formed the school board) react to negative information about themselves that I might uncover in my study?

I asked the Director of Education how long it would take for the council to formally approve the wording of the latest version of the Community Success questionnaire. In answer to my question, the Director indicated that it might be another few weeks before the Prayer Group's protest was resolved. The implication of this was that it would be better to wait until tensions on the reserve lessened before the questionnaire was circulated.

In the late spring of 1992 I finally received approval to distribute the Community Success questionnaire on the reserve. Without exception, the people appeared more than willing to take part. Most parents preferred to complete the questionnaire while I waited. This proved beneficial because it gave them a chance to ask me questions and for me to clarify the questionnaire for them. Those who did not fill out the questionnaire in my presence found it easiest to leave the completed forms at the Band Office, the hub of activities on the reserve. The rate of return was exceptionally high. I felt that the people wanted to be heard, particularly after the divisiveness of the election, but I could not discount the possibility that their enthusiasm was driven more by political feeling than concern for their children's school.

I asked for copies of previous evaluations of the school, but it seemed that few people in the community knew of their existence or where they could be located. When I finally found them, it was easy to see why they had not been warmly received. These

evaluations were fairly empirical in nature, and the findings simply affirmed what everyone already knew: Measured against the provincial standard, the students of this community did not score well.

For two weeks during the fall of 1992, now a full-time graduate student, I returned to the school and shadowed the evaluation team as they interviewed the staff of the school. For many of the teachers, this scrutiny seemed to be a harrowing process. There was great uneasiness in the school. Questions to the teachers varied from observations of their teaching practice to more philosophical inquiries about their goals as teachers. Other staffers were questioned about their understanding of their job descriptions, their qualifications for the job, what they really did in their work, and how that work had changed with time.

At the conclusion of the evaluation, one of the evaluators met with the teachers to inform them that his report was largely favorable. He praised the school staff and congratulated the Director for assembling such an excellent teaching team. The teachers felt reassured. The evaluation had been very stressful for most of them, adding to the stress that they already felt in what they perceived to be a difficult teaching situation.

The next day the band council decided to cap teachers' salaries at $40,000, which meant a cut in pay for some of the senior teachers. It was believed that this was an attempt by the council to preempt a demand by the teachers for a pay raise and increased health benefits in light of the favorable evaluation. The salary cap, coming on the heels of the evaluation, was a bitter blow to the teachers. They were told that they were welcome to return the following year under the salary cap and were assured that their jobs, at least,

were secure. A short time later I learned that in fact the council was considering not renewing the contracts of some or all of the teachers.

During the evaluation one of the evaluators asked a teacher, "Philosophically, do you expect children in the school to have the same quality of education as other children elsewhere?" The teacher replied, "We are concerned about whether we will be getting our cheques each month." This answer was indicative of the malaise of anger, insecurity, and frustration felt by teachers at that time—feelings mirrored by parents and other community members in my survey.

Late in the evaluation process, one of the evaluators arranged a meeting of 12 parents, five teachers, an Elder, and a band councillor. The meeting had actually been postponed several times, because at one point school officials were caught attempting to stack the meeting with hand-selected supporters. In any case, the parents and others at the meeting identified certain school issues that they felt were critical. Discipline was high on the list. The parents saw no clear school policy on discipline, but agreed that it was a problem that teachers could not solve without parental help. The teachers expressed the fear that if they disciplined the child of a band councillor or other influential person in the community, their jobs would be at risk. The parents were also anxious to know whether the results of the evaluation would be binding on the school board. The evaluator admitted that this was not the case. The parents expressed the need for a new school board independent of the Chief and band council. The evaluator responded that there was not enough interest at this time among members of the community to take on the responsibility of having an independent school board. Until that situation changed, he suggested that the Chief and band council remain the *de facto* school board. Some parents

agreed that concern about education in the community was "all talk." Another parent wanted to know how to motivate students to excel. One recommended self-motivation. Resentment on the reserve toward educated Natives was mentioned. "Why isn't my kid learning?" demanded another parent. Someone suggested the need for a community-wide meeting on education issues—a meeting for community members only. There was a feeling among the parents at the meeting that the community had to solve its own school problems. Though these statements indicated the parents' depth of frustration and anger, the mood of the meeting was largely positive. There was a feeling that there was something constructive in meeting together to air these issues and to compare opinions. This meeting would remain in my memory for many years.

Around the time of this meeting, I was casting around for a title for my study of the evaluation process. One potential title I noted in my journal was "Are We Doing This Right? One Native School Faces the Evaluation Process." In a very real sense I knew the answer to that rhetorical question. The process I was witnessing was not right at all. At one point one of the evaluators said, "The community has no plan. They don't know where they want to go with their school." This was an interesting statement considering that "the community" had not really been consulted.

Another point that was raised at the parents' meeting was the uniqueness of this community's school. There was a feeling that this school could not be fairly compared to other schools. This stood in sharp contrast to the opinion of one of the evaluators. In fact, several days before the parents' meeting I had asked the evaluator directly whether he had found anything unique about this school. He said, "No, there is no reason it should be [considered unique]." He told me he saw no reason for approaching individual schools

differently, be they public schools, private schools, separate schools, or locally controlled Native schools. He reiterated, "I would do nothing different in this school or any other school elsewhere."

In the days immediately following the evaluation in 1992, the school staff felt that the school was "very quickly going downhill." Unrest was increasing among the teachers over the salary cap and the impression that they were not being dealt with honestly. There were escalating discipline problems among the students. "The grade nine students are out of control," one staff member told me.

At about that same time I had the chance to interview a superintendent with DIAND who was familiar with the recently completed evaluation of the school. He called it a whitewash and a waste of money. He told me that it had been "unethical" for the evaluators to write a favorable report given the current conditions in the school. It was his opinion that the education of the children had become a secondary concern for both the band council and the agencies funding them.

I agree that the evaluation process I had witnessed did nothing to address the underlying problems facing the school and the community. The report was accurate in its praise of the teachers for doing the best that they could in a difficult situation, but such praise only masked a deep unrest and helplessness felt by both parents and teachers, who were daily faced with a school board that seemed to be wandering aimlessly as it hemorrhaged money (at this point the board was thought to be some $200,000 in debt), and the education of the community children continued to deteriorate.

Given this unrest and the evident ineffectiveness of the evaluation process, I felt that my study was going nowhere. My interviews with teachers and parents quickly

became "gripe sessions," with the participants venting their anger toward the school board and others. I also found myself being drawn into the growing labor dispute between the teachers and the band council. It became increasingly evident that I would be unable to complete my study. Reluctantly, I terminated my research in the early spring of 1993. That study was ultimately aborted before completion, but my experiences at that time formed the prelude to my current study and were an impetus toward it.

A New Opportunity

When issues remain unresolved, history has a tendency to repeat itself. In 1999 the band council was required to evaluate the school again. Once again there had been a contentious election on the reserve. And once again the new band council commissioned a professional evaluator to assess the school.

The resulting evaluation report was so overwhelmingly negative that the council buried it (perhaps literally), because no one I spoke to had seen the final report. The principal and the Director of Education resigned before the evaluation was even finished. As in previous years, the evaluation had focused on the school itself and had done nothing to address the same community concerns that had been fomenting dissatisfaction in 1992.

At this time I too was once again seeking a topic for graduate research. Shortly after these events, I visited the reserve and met with the new Chief to discuss his potential interest in a different form of school evaluation. He mentioned the debacle of the most recent evaluation, and I reminded him of the 1992 evaluation and my aborted study. The Chief spoke of the unresolved issues in the community and the uniqueness of the school.

He asked me if I could suggest an alternative to the cookie-cutter evaluations of the past. I shared with him some of my observations from 1992 and some ideas I had developed based on them. The Chief asked me to write a formal application spelling out what I proposed. Subsequently, I outlined a process that would involve the community directly in a process of self-examination, in which I would serve as both facilitator and researcher. The approval of the Chief and band council initiated the current study. Although the outcomes of the process were important to the Chief and council and members of the community and school, I have focused in this study on the process itself in a belief that although outcomes may be unique, the process, if successful, might provide an evaluative framework for other First Nations communities with band-operated schools.

Assumptions

For the purposes of this study I am guided by the following assumptions:

1. There is a definite need for a new process or model for evaluating First Nations schools.
2. For the process to be successful, community involvement is necessary.
3. Any process, to be successful, will have to contend with the political issues of the community.
4. The school has a vital role to play in the community.
5. Finally, the parents and other community members have contributions to make to this process, and they are willing and able to do so.

CHAPTER 5

THE PROCESS DESCRIBED

This chapter contains a chronological description of the data gathering process and my reflections on that process as it occurred. First I outline the method used and then describe the circles and their discussions. In the last section I provide a description of the participants' views of the process.

Some Thoughts About the Process

When I began to think about an alternative to the current school evaluation approach required of all First Nations schools, I had only vague ideas of the form or nature of what I considered to be a better, more improved process. After having spent 20 years of teaching in a cross-cultural setting, I knew that the standard school evaluation approach was meaningless and served little or no pedagogical purpose. I reasoned that any alternative conceptualization could be actualized only by means of a trial and error process.

By the first gathering circle I knew that the gathering circles would be generically organized by peer groups (i.e., teachers grouped with teachers and parents grouped with parents). I came to learn that this decision proved to be a very useful method for this study.

There were some aspects common to each gathering circle:

1. Each gathering circle began with concerns and issues and then moved on to discussions of any claims that the participants might have. Once they agreed on a concern, a guided and prolonged discussion took place. The participants

were asked to provide background information that shed light on each concern. Members offered examples of why the concerns should be viewed as concerns. Each gathering circle agreed upon a list of concerns, and as each concern was discussed, the group was asked to identify solutions for each of their collective concerns.

2. Once the concerns and resolutions were identified by each of the gathering circles, the discussion focused on any claims that they might have. Claims were positive aspects found in the school system about which the group reached consensus. A discussion of the claims was carried out in far less time than was spent on the discussion and resolution of concerns. This was true of all of the gathering circles.
3. The process of identifying all of their concerns and possible solutions took some gathering circles many months to accomplish. Similarly, some gathering circles spent weeks hammering out a list of their claims. In all, from start to finish, the gathering circles were formed during the months of September and October, and the last gathering circle work ceased in April.
4. Once the gathering circles met for the first time, each successive circle began with a review of the transcriptions from the previous day's gathering. Generally speaking, gathering circle members agreed to meet on a certain day and for a duration of time each week (i.e., the teacher gathering circle met every Tuesday from 3:30-5:00 p.m.).

I was impressed that the community members were not reluctant to share their views of the school. Everyone seemed to have an opinion. I was always amazed and

pleasantly surprised by the community members' willingness to share their views in the circle on matters both sensitive and general in nature. In retrospect, I came to believe that the participants felt the need to talk about these issues with each other for their own very personal reasons. Once a comfort level had been reached (in most cases that would have been the second or third gathering), people appeared more relaxed. The tell-tale sign was the chit-chat of the early arrivers and the hangers-on after the gathering circle was over. People also began to bring small snacks and coffee to the sessions, which, to me, was a very good sign that they were beginning to feel more comfortable and to take ownership of the process. In what appeared to me to be fairly quick fashion, the gathering circles seemed to jell, and once the door was closed as an indication of the start of the gathering circle, the group seemed to take on a life of its own.

Throughout those months of gathering circle discussions I came to understand that the participants also genuinely believed that what they, as members of the community, were doing in these circles was important. They also felt, through their discussions with me, that they were playing a vital role as members of the community as a whole. I believe the members thought, to some degree, that they all had a responsibility to play in the improvement of the school. As a follow-up to the gathering circles, many of the participants felt a sense of empowerment and that their participation could contribute to meaningful change in the community school.

Initially, I was concerned about the sustained willingness of the participants to remain faithful and engaged in the gathering circle process. With each gathering circle I was prepared to be disappointed by absences or member withdrawals from the circle process. However, to my delight, participation levels remained remarkably high

throughout the entire process. Throughout the eight months that the gathering circles met, the attrition rate was inconsequential. Only one member asked not to be included in the study at the outset. Another member, much later in the process, expressed reluctance to complete the resolution list questionnaire, fearing reprisals from the board. All in all, the members of the community who began the gathering circle process in September remained faithful to the process in April. The goodwill and spirit of the circles sustained involvement. This was truly a remarkable success.

There was also remarkable agreement from all gathering circles as to the concerns, issues, and claims expressed. One group might have expended considerably more time on why a concern should be labeled a concern than another, but agreement about key issues and claims was evident. Although each gathering circle had its own unique slant and view of the issues, there was a high degree of unanimity.

Members of all of the gathering circles expressed heart-felt examples of how they thought the community school was failing to meet the needs of the community. They recognized drug and alcohol addictions as having the greatest negative impact on the school. As difficult as it was to listen to and discuss such issues, it was something that I, as facilitator, felt needed to take place. I was always careful to place these discussions in such a way that members recognized it as a community issue and that it ultimately needed to be dealt with as such.

How to deal with the need to arrive at a common collective consensus of all resolutions was problematic and took much thought and reflection. How to achieve a collective agreement from all gathering circles with respect to the resolutions was challenging. Deciding on the level of support that a resolution required in order to make it

on the list for presentation to the board for adoption was troublesome. If this process was to be repeated, a larger gathering circle with representatives from all gathering circles would need to be organized in order to reach consensus on a final resolution list for the board to adjudicate.

One incident during one gathering circle in which a member objected to the group's discussing the failures of past councils was unexpected. In retrospect, this situation might have been dealt with differently. The participant felt that because previous councils were not present to defend themselves, they should not be judged. Although I pointed out that such a discussion was necessary and was not intended to make judgements on any individuals, the expressed concern was real, and more time might have been taken to discuss his concern further.

I never had the impression that there was an "us versus them" mentality within the gathering circles. When one gathering circle raised the issue of attracting good teachers, the issue of salaries was not raised in a disparaging way, but rather as a solution in order to attract good, qualified teachers for the community.

As has already been mentioned, for some of the gathering circles meeting times were often difficult to coordinate. Some gatherings were cancelled most often on the day the group was to meet. Reasons for cancellations were many and varied, and frustration and disappointment were inevitable feelings. I never fully accepted the cancellations, and it was difficult not to see them as personal affronts. I came to understand these cancellations much later as inevitable occurrences and very much a part of the researcher's role in qualitative research. I would recommend that anyone undertaking a similar study in the future make advance phone calls as a way to confirm and reconfirm

gathering circle dates and times. Despite these steps, cancellations will occur but should not be taken personally.

The spiral nature of the gathering circles made them work far better than I imagined they would. I made every conceivable effort to ensure that the dialogue within each group was dynamic, reflective, and open to all participants. After each gathering circle had reached consensus on issues and concerns and claims, a final list of resolutions was compiled for a collective consensus.

Gathering circles, once organized, seemed to take on a life of their own. Once the members came to understand how the circles were being carried out, some came to me saying that they found the approach and methods useful in their own community work areas. This was very satisfying to me. I reasoned that if community members felt comfortable with the process, then there was a high probability that this practice would be carried on long after I had left the community.

There were many whirlpool types of spirals to this process—spirals within the spirals. There were many subcircles that also continued on and where conversations obviously occurred outside of the circles. I think that the issue/concern dictated to a large extent whether minicircles were happening. If the issue or concern was felt about strongly enough by a number of members, then that was talked about outside of the circles. Issues that generated strong feelings appeared to have a greater impact outside the circles.

The action research process involves a self-reflective spiral of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and replanning. It meant that members needed to be aware of a sense of process and to refine their perceptions to account for that process. So there were many circles within circles.

Gatekeepers were critical to the process and to the success of the study. Without them I would not have been able to get my foot in the door of the community. The Chief was my biggest, most influential gatekeeper. His initial support was critical to the study's moving on to the various stages. His endorsement was necessary and important.

Other gatekeepers allowed the doors of the community to be opened to me. Some gave me credibility in the community by talking to friends and saying that "he is a good guy. He is trying to help us. Talk to him. He wants to help us improve our school." One gatekeeper defended me when the former Chief thought that I was meddling with the Elders. She opened the almost impossible door to the Elders in the community. She also stuck by me and guided me in meetings with the Chief.

In this chapter I present my data gathering process in the community in a more or less chronological narrative, touching on many of the successes and difficulties that I encountered. I will conclude with the school board's passing of the majority of the resolutions generated by the gathering circle process.

A New Beginning

In the spring of 1999, after having received an educational leave from my employer, I visited the reserve to talk to the chief and was invited to write a formal letter requesting permission to undertake a study of the school.

Returning to the reserve to talk to the Chief about his response was like coming home again—familiar yet different— and driving up to the Band Office was oddly difficult for me. I wondered whether the community leaders would support the project. Even though I had previous exposure to the community under study—Guba and Lincoln

(1989) referred to this as "prior ethnography"—I had not been there for many years and wondered whether they would still remember me kindly and trust me to undertake this important work. I did not know what to expect or how they might respond to my letter. Several Chiefs and councils had come and gone since I had last worked in the community.

Some people gathered outside the Band Office were chatting in the July sunshine. A smile of recognition, a handshake, a friendly greeting of "*Abawashtit*!" and it was like old times again. Most had forgotten my name, but they remembered my face. I recalled instantly why I had remained as the principal of the community school for four years. Over those years I had developed friendships here. I enjoyed the people. I liked to believe that some of them thought of me as a friend.

My gatekeepers had kept me apprised of happenings within the school and the community, and I was aware that the community school had gone through a difficult couple of years, particularly in the last year. Discipline was a perennial problem. A general discontent within the community over the direction that the school was taking, prevalent for decades, was still evident. More particularly, the school was functioning in the aftermath of a very unfavorable evaluation conducted just a few months earlier.

Pursuant to DIAND policy, band-operated schools are to be evaluated every five years, but 1999 had been this school's sixth year without an evaluation. As in the past, an outside team was hired to undertake the work. In May, at the conclusion of a four-week evaluation process, but before the final report was written, a number of key school system employees abruptly resigned. The final report was never made public.

My meeting with the Chief on that July day lasted no more than 20 minutes. After providing an explanation of what my study would entail, the Chief, in his decisive manner, thought it was "a good idea."

On one of my first visits to the reserve after receiving permission and ethics approval for the study, just prior to the beginning of the school year, all appeared well with the community. The days were still warm and the atmosphere outside the Band Office was relaxed. I sat on the bench and engaged in conversation with whoever happened to pass by. Very early in the data collection phase I wanted to be visible in the community. I initiated informal, friendly chats about what had transpired on the reserve since the last time I had been there. By doing so, I hoped to foster a feeling of mutual comfort. Essentially, I wanted to meet people so that they could spread word of what I was doing. From past experience I knew that getting out into the community was important. I wanted to take full advantage of my early visits to the reserve to "sell" my study to as many people as I could. I knew that it would take only a few key people to express feelings about the impending study to cause a ripple effect in the community, negatively or positively; therefore I wanted as many people as possible to hear about the study directly from me, rather than from someone else with his or her own agenda.

The Chief was on holiday, but another influential band councillor who was just then arriving at the office was pointed out to me. If I needed anyone on my side, it would be this man. I explained to him the gathering circle process and the matter of consensus building. He expressed his disappointment in the recent evaluation. It was, he said, "negative" and failed to mention all of the positive things that the band was doing—the adult upgrading and the increased enrolment of students in high school. The number of

graduates, he said, had increased substantially over the years. He noted that there had been three Grade 12 graduates last year. "No matter what we said to [the evaluation team], they would not change their mind." From this I assumed that there had been some unsuccessful lobbying by the band council for the evaluators to rewrite their final report. (I was to hear many contradictory statements about the 1999 evaluation over the coming months, but the consensus was that it was "too negative.")

I was relieved to find that this band councillor was supportive of the study. He offered suggestions on how the gathering circle meetings could be organized in order to get the best possible turnout. He thought such meetings should take place in the school or community hall. The school, I thought, was ideal for meeting with the school staff, but the community hall was too large a space for small gathering circles of parents and other community members. Eventually, many of the circles took place in parents' homes, in the medical centre, or in the basement at the old federal school.

A community official told me not to be "too easy on us" and not to "sugar-coat" the final recommendations for schooling improvement. He reiterated his wish that criticism be directed accordingly. "If I am to learn and make improvements, I first must know what the problems are," he said. "If I don't know there is a problem, then I can hardly take steps to remedy it." He went on to say that political interference in the school must stop. He raised the problem of nepotism in the hiring of school support staff and the perennial question of whether there should be a separate board of education whose sole task would be to support the daily efforts of the school personnel. This particular official, and many other members of the band council, appeared to embrace the idea of a separate school board.

Gatekeepers

Stringer (1996) stated that the research facilitator must ensure that community-member groups who "are primarily concerned with the issues at hand" (p. 51) are approached for involvement in the research project. He called these key groups *critical reference groups*. Stringer went on to say, "In many such instances, [researchers] have not only transgressed the boundaries of people's symbolic territory, but failed to obtain 'permission' to enter that territory" (p. 51). He suggested that the research facilitator must identify and communicate with people in the community who have authority and influence and that they must be approached about being able to do work there. These key influential people are called *gatekeepers* or *opinion leaders*. The Chief and important band councillors were primary examples of formal and informal gatekeepers.

> Formal gatekeepers have authority and informal gatekeepers have influence, but either has the power to support or hinder an evaluation. . . . Each gatekeeper requires a separate negotiation (although each successful negotiation makes the next easier). Each gatekeeper will have essentially the same questions (often related to the purposes of the study, the risks to which the particular stakeholder group will be exposed, and the possible payoffs to the group that make participation desirable). (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, pp. 198-199)

In this community the distinction between formal and informal gatekeepers was blurred to the same degree that the positions of power *holder* (elected and administrative officers) and power *broker* (Elders and distinguished but non-elected persons) blurred. It was a culture in which a word from an elected person's sibling, parent, or child could weigh as heavily as the word of that official.

I needed to negotiate with a number of formal and informal gatekeepers throughout my study. I found that several gatekeepers not only kept the gates to certain

segments of the population, but were also willing to be invaluable guides once they were persuaded of the importance of the work to the community. Three individuals became of particular importance to my work in contacting other people to participate in gathering circle discussions, arranging gathering circle opportunities with community Elders, helping me to understand the cultural traditions of the Native people when meeting with leaders and Elders, and instructing me on correct protocol when dealing with these revered persons.

On the other hand, some people in positions of authority whom I had supposed might be formal gatekeepers (some administrative officials, for instance) proved to be relatively inconsequential (as gatekeepers) to my research.

The First School Staff Meeting

I felt uneasy as I began data collection. I had difficulty contacting certain key officials by telephone in the first days of my study. However, I was able to contact the principal. I explained my study to him and asked for his support. Though new to his position and somewhat overwhelmed with all of the work that needed to be done prior to school commencement, he offered his support of the project. I arranged with him to talk to his staff at the first staff meeting. The principal is another example of a formal gatekeeper and also an interesting example of "prior ethnography"—though in this case it was *ethnos* of fellow educators: I had known him previously as a teacher in another band-operated school. Some time later he admitted to me that he might not have been so receptive to my study had he not known me. As a former principal of this unique school, I was able to help familiarize him with his duties and offer solutions for many of the

small technical problems typical of a new school year. This assistance proved to be my contribution to our non-negotiated *quid pro quo*.

On the day of the staff meeting I was guardedly optimistic not only that the school staff and members of the community would feel that the study was worthwhile, but also that they would willingly give of their time and participate. Participants' willingness to dedicate to the gathering circles was an unknown factor. I feared that it would be difficult to keep everyone positive and involved in the gathering circles throughout the coming weeks. Working out suitable schedules for everyone and maintaining their interest were primary concerns. I knew that these teachers had little free time during the average school day to devote to new projects that did not relate directly to the students. They also commuted a considerable distance each day to and from the school. Participating in my study could not help but inconvenience them to some extent. In fact, several weeks into the process the number of teachers at one gathering circle had dwindled to six. Of those six, several left the meeting early, saying that they were too tired to remain.

Just before the staff meeting I encountered a school official who was decidedly cool toward the study. This official felt that the parents would not be very receptive to another evaluation so soon after the last. I assured this official that it would not be the point of my study to blame anyone in particular for the school's shortcomings, but rather to address all issues, concerns, and claims of stakeholders in an attempt to reach consensus. The study would emphasize stakeholder empowerment and ownership. The official appeared unconvinced.

Privately, I asked the principal if he had any concerns about my study. He expressed the hope that I would not want to begin interviewing the staff immediately

because there was too much work for teachers to do early in the school year. I explained that I would probably spend my initial time in the community organizing and scheduling gathering circles for parents.

I was placed first on the agenda of the staff meeting and addressed the staff for about 15 minutes. I explained the nature of the study and the group meetings in which I hoped they would participate. I knew the time commitment, an hour or two after school once a week, would be difficult for some. I tried to frame the study's purpose in positive terms and added that their gathering circle meetings would not begin until they had a chance to settle into their school assignments. I explained that staff participation was voluntary; however, their involvement would be essential for any meaningful outcome. Two questions were asked: "Will the study involve just the school?" and "Will you be at the school every day?" Other than that, there appeared to be little or no reaction from the staff, positive or negative. I supposed that fear of possible political repercussions caused some of the staff members to hold back on their responses.

Later in the day I met with the school paraprofessionals. Their response was less guarded. One individual expressed skepticism as to whether the process would work in a community where disgruntled parents often bypass the school authorities and go directly to the Chief or council members to intercede in school matters. Another individual stated that new school policies had to be developed every year because nothing ever seemed to be written down. Several paraprofessionals thought that the community-based examination of the school was worth a try but that "it's all political." They all agreed that there was a lack of communication between the parents and the school. I told them that

these were valid concerns and that they should remember them when we met in the gathering circles.

Before leaving the school that day, I met with some of the teachers individually. These private meetings were enlightening. I discovered that the staff had preconceived notions of my role. One teacher had heard that I would be at the school for a year (rather than my planned four months) and that after the study was complete, I would help develop and write school policy. Yet another teacher believed that it would be tough for everyone in the community to agree with one another. The majority of the staff agreed that one two-hour gathering circle per week, immediately after school, was not unreasonable.

Interagency and Student Meetings

Three days later I attended a meeting of the school staff with various community health agency personnel. Each health representative wanted to familiarize school staff with their various school-based health programs. These meetings were commonly known as interagency meetings. They were an opportunity for community specialists and the various agencies within the community to come together to discuss overlapping programs and to coordinate community services. These meetings often involved the school staff, the school being the place where the children are most accessible. Because it was the beginning of the school year, a number of concerns were raised. The school smoking policy, smoking among junior high children, poor nutrition habits of the youth, and prescription drug usage in the community were concerns raised by the nurse. Once again I discovered that staff members were more willing to talk about some of their concerns.

In the matter of student discipline, they were anxious to get the kind of support they felt they needed, which evidently had been lacking in the previous year. One teacher described an incident in which he had taken a child to the school administrator last year because the student told him to "F off." The teacher was chastised because of his discipline methods.

Around that same time I also attended an assembly for junior and senior high students at the cultural centre. A document called "Top Ten Rules of Junior/Senior High School" was distributed with strict rules of behavior that had been established in response to some students' requests last year to make the reserve school more like a "regular" school. I was introduced to the students as a university student working on a school/community project.

Selecting Participants

Having tentatively established gathering circle groups among the school staff, I turned my attention to the wider community. I planned to solicit participants for the study by means of community notices, agency meetings, word-of-mouth, and face-to-face contact.

Essentially, the participants would select themselves, based largely on their willingness to participate. I became aware of how much more difficult my research would be without prior knowledge of the community. Knowledge of whom to talk to was critically important. Although I had formal permission to undertake the study, it was evident that parents would make their own choices regardless of what the political leaders had agreed to.

During my second week at the school, I arranged with the principal to send notices home with the students inviting parents to participate in the study. The notices outlined the nature of the study and my data collection approaches, and asked parents to telephone me directly at my home number or to leave their names with the secretary at the school if they wished to participate.

As time passed I found myself spending more and more time in the community. School staff and parents saw me almost daily now. Slowly I made headway, developing trusting relationships. According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), "Respondents are much more likely to be both candid and forthcoming if they respect the inquirer and believe in his or her integrity" (p. 256). The credibility of the study, they maintained, depends largely on the "extent to which trust has been established" (p. 257). Trust is developed by degrees. It is something that must be worked on everyday. It is fragile and, once established, is not to be taken as a given. It can be "destroyed overnight in the face of an ill-advised action" (p. 257). In retrospect, this last admonition seems like an overstatement of the fragility of trust and probably caused me to be more cautious in my dealing with the community than I needed to be.

Initially, parent reaction to my study was guarded. One important member of the community stated that "parents would not likely agree on anything." Many parents wanted to know whether the Chief and the band council were paying me. This was a frequently voiced concern early in the study. But as the work advanced, much of this initial mistrust in *my* motives faded, though many participants remained skeptical of the motives of political authorities who had sanctioned the work.

The Role of Researcher and Facilitator

Some days on site were spent just listening to parents and other community members. One day an important political figure talked at length about his ambitions and what he could do to advance the school and community. The teachers also began to talk to me openly about their views. One educator told me he enjoyed teaching at the school but wondered whether he could ever work in a regular school again. In spite of his lower salary and year-to-year contract, he still liked teaching there.

The low salary grid compared to those of other school districts was a concern frequently raised by all the teachers, and I was afraid that the teachers' gathering circles would become union-like sessions for airing grievances about wages and working conditions. If these matters became the primary focus of the teachers' gathering circle, the Chief and council might view me as a provocateur. Would the school's paraprofessionals then take issue with the teacher's higher salaries, resulting in a fractured staff? Would parents blame me for labor unrest in the school?

In light of these and similar doubts, I frequently found myself reflecting on my role as researcher and facilitator. Considering the nature of the gathering circles, there was a high potential for the airing of sensitive issues that might offend one or another segment of the population, especially those in power. I did not want my project to fail because of a negative political or community reaction. I found some guidance from Lincoln and Guba (1989), who pointed out that a crucial issue for the researcher is an acquaintance

> with local social, political, and cultural factors. Every evaluation context inevitably has its own unique mix of such factors; knowledge about them is absolutely essential if the evaluation is to be a success . . . and there are no holds

> barred with respect to what claims, concerns, and issues are eligible for inclusion. (p. 200)

In the same place the authors maintained that the evaluator must not preclude certain claims, concerns, and issues because "they are political in nature and hence beyond the pale of disciplined inquiry" (p. 201). In a naturalistic evaluation, value-based considerations (such as political, moral, and religious views) were given the same weight as "fact-based" considerations. It became clear to me that in spite of my fears, all issues, concerns, and claims arising naturally within the community had to be open for discussion, resolution, and consensus if positive change was ever to occur. Community members had to be exposed to each other's views.

I did not come to the community with ready-made answers and advice, but I would work with community members to articulate the issues. My role as facilitator was to ask community members to name their issues or concerns, to help them analyze the problem, to reflect on it, and then to ask them to propose solutions.

In gathering circles with parents, I wanted them to view me neither as a researcher nor as someone who "knows better." The aim of participatory research is to break down the barrier and distinction of researcher and those being researched. In this process research is viewed not only as a means for gaining knowledge, but also as a tool for education, empowerment, and mobilization for action.

The researcher plays the role of catalyst (interventionist), someone from the outside who starts the empowerment process. The researcher initiates, mobilizes, and organizes people. The community members are the key actors and not passive recipients of information.

While facilitating one gathering circle, I was suddenly struck by an idea that might resolve a thorny problem with the support staff. Without thinking, I blurted out this idea to the group, who then adopted the idea as a resolution. In retrospect, I realized that in the enthusiasm of the moment I had probably stepped beyond my facilitator's role by suggesting my own ideas. There was no way to know whether the group would have come up with the idea themselves. I often found myself anxious to contribute actively to the discussions, but I resolved to check myself from such interference in future gatherings.

Commitment to the Process

The most difficult aspect of this study for me was not to expect too much of community members in terms of my intrusion on their time. I had to remind myself that the participants did not spend most of their waking hours thinking of the study, nor had they absented themselves from their normal lives to work on it. With the first gathering circle quickly approaching, I began thinking about whether I should ask participants to sign statements committing themselves to be open and receptive to the views of others. I decided that requiring participants to sign such statements would probably only scare them away. In any case, as I was to discover, a commitment to openness would not be a problem. However, a commitment to show up for scheduled meetings, to return resolutions sheets on time, and to keep other appointments with me would prove difficult for many busy community members. At times my personal frustration with these foibles was almost unbearable. Cancelled or missed appointments with political and administrative figures became the most frustrating reoccurring problem for me as a

researcher. Most puzzling was what I saw as the lack of professional commitment on the part of some administrative figures to their jobs vis-à-vis the school, such as the failure of two key figures to attend an important resolutions meeting I had with the school board.

Indeed, the arrangement of interviews and gathering circle meetings was a logistical nightmare throughout the study. It never became easier, but I learned to take advantage of unexpected free time on the reserve created by missed appointments. For instance, when a certain manager did not show up for an appointment arranged to be held in the medical centre, I used the opportunity to interview the Director of Community Health Services. She appeared to be very supportive of the project and placed me on the agenda of the next Health Services staff meeting. Following that interview, I arranged an impromptu interview with a parent whom I knew well from my earlier days on the reserve.

Parental commitment in the school was also a problem. In late September I was invited to attend the annual Meet-the-Teacher Night at the school, which I thought would be a good opportunity to talk to parents and generally get the word around about what I was doing. Unfortunately, only three parents turned out.

Confidentiality and the Tape Recorder

Even before the first meetings, some members had already expressed concerns that what they said in the gathering circles might get back to the school board, resulting in employment repercussions. Shortly after a one-on-one interview with a veteran teacher, I was struck by the fact that she appeared genuinely afraid of reprisal from the

band authority. She was fearful of saying anything against anyone or anything that might cause her to lose her job. I felt a huge weight of responsibility on my shoulders.

I assured all of the participants continually of the strict confidentiality of the process. I constantly reiterated to members of the group how important confidentiality was and how vulnerable all of us could be if the confidentiality of who said what was not maintained. There were no reports of this confidentiality ever being broken.

For my own notes and transcripts I was already developing a list of pseudonyms to protect the identities of all the people with whom I was coming into contact in the community, particularly those involved in gathering circles. When interviewing participants for the study, I sought to do so in private areas (i.e., homes, workspaces) where they felt most comfortable. For example, all interviews with school staff members took place in a certain classroom that became our accustomed "interview space." Interviews with local managers took place in their respective offices or private spaces in the buildings where they worked. Several parents decided that they would like to meet as a gathering circle in the old school basement—an area used by the local Head Start Program—a comfortable and familiar place for them.

When I began the data gathering process, I worried about whether the tape recorder would be a distraction for the participants. All participants were made aware that they were being recorded, but I made an effort to keep the tape recorder out of sight as much as possible. In the gathering circles and other interviews, the tape recorder was almost completely forgotten after the first few moments. Almost without exception, no one objected to having a tape recorder on during our talks. On a few occasions teachers expressed fear that somehow their words would get back to the band council, but this fear

melted away as trust was developed. One participant expressly refused to be taped and then quickly changed her mind when I pointed out that there would be difficulty making sure her words were accurately relayed to others without the tapes. Some other community members (very few) vocally objected to my recording the words of anyone on the reserve, but these were the same people who objected to my study for other reasons and who would not have participated even in the absence of electronic recording.

Peer Groups

After talking to a parent at the band office, I decided upon organizing the various gathering circles within peer groups: the student group, the teacher group, the paraprofessional group, several parent groups, the Elder's group, and the school board group. These are what Stringer (1996) called *intragroup* gatherings—"single stakeholder groups" gathered together "to discuss their problems and describe their situational contexts" (p. 69). This parent told me that she thought that people were going to be reluctant to offer their thoughts if they had to speak in public at a large meeting, for fear that those thoughts might run contrary to community opinion. I knew that she was correct in as far as the parents and other general community members were concerned. But I also began to wonder whether teachers or paraprofessionals would be willing to speak their mind in the presence of their principal or the Director of Education. Put in their position, I doubted whether *I* would feel free to speak my mind under those conditions. It also occurred to me that teachers would probably view the school quite differently from paraprofessionals, and vice versa. I reasoned that teachers or paraprofessionals would be more willing to speak freely among other teachers or paraprofessionals. Interviews with

the school administrator and director could be done individually. Once again, I did not want the principal to think that he had to espouse the 'party line' in front of the director if he held other views. All of this made it clear to me that the gathering circles would have to be formed within peer groups and that managers and administrators would have to be interviewed individually.

I met with the school board as a gathering circle early in the process to familiarize its members with the methodology and to gather the councilors' claims, concerns, and issues. The major input of the school board, however, would come late in the process when they vetted the final wording of the resolutions. The board, of course, had the ultimate responsibility to approve the resolutions or set them aside.

Within the school staff groups I believed that each group might have valuable input to share about how other groups within the staff performed their duties (teachers commenting on the caretaking staff, for instance). This belief proved to be a tactical error on my part. By the second gathering circle of the teachers' group, members made it clear to me that they would be extremely uncomfortable developing resolutions for another stakeholder group (e.g., monitoring whether the caretakers were doing their job), and although they had no problem *identifying* what the issues and concerns were concerning how other groups performed their school duties, once again, they felt uncomfortable suggesting solutions for another group's difficulties.

After some reflection I saw the wisdom of what they were saying, and I was led to make a significant alteration in my planned methodology. Originally I had intended to begin sharing resolutions *among* the groups as soon as possible to achieve a kind of interdisciplinary input from the outset. Now I realized the impracticality of this plan. I

decided instead that I would seek issues, concerns, claims, and consensus on resolutions *within* each stakeholder group first. Each group would be free to identify only those concerns that members felt to be within its scope. Then, near the end of the process, when each group had approved its own set of resolutions, the resolutions of all groups would be packaged together. We would then seek shared consensus on that combined package of resolutions among the whole community. By doing this, I hoped to preserve the anonymity of the various stakeholders and groups, separating their identities from their respective resolutions. In the final package no resolution would or could be identified with any particular person or group—and indeed, through the consensus process, resolutions would cease to be the "property" of any particular segment of the population and would in fact become community resolutions. Caretakers, for instance, would *not* see teachers resolving that wastepaper baskets should be emptied more often, but rather, there would be a community-wide resolution that caretakers should perform their assigned duties in such and such a manner.

In a single stroke this change in methodology transformed the process of this research from an unwieldy behemoth into an elegant and workable method of reaching equitable consensus within a community. It became my working model for the third (and all subsequent) teachers' group meetings and was the method used from the beginning for all other groups. I have no doubt that this change was the single most significant factor in the eventual success of the process.

Group Size

As my first large gathering circle meeting of 13 teachers approached, I gave a great deal of thought to how the meeting should be organized. Given the size of the group, I had to decide between using recycled or spiraled circles. Guba and Lincoln (1989) described spiraled and recycled circles in this way:

> When they are recycled, the same respondents as before are involved. . . . One reason for recycling is to provide a second (or third or . . .) opportunity for respondents to critique and hone the emerging joint construction; multiple cyclings may obviate the need for a general credibility check. . . . Circles may also be spiraled, in that the first group of respondents is replaced by another group of respondents selected so as to be very like the first. This group then continues with the refining/honing process. The advantage of spiraling is that it brings fresh minds to the task, enlarges the group of persons who have input into the process (increases the base of ownership, some would say), and reduces the amount of time and effort any one respondent must provide. On the down side, spiraling also implies extra effort on the part of the evaluator, who must start at ground zero with the second group instead of being able to build on their prior experience. (p. 208)

Considering the distance that teachers traveled to and from the community each day, I thought of dividing this gathering circle into two spiraled groups, each group attending every other meeting. This would reduce by half the number of meetings any one teacher would be required to attend. However, after much thought I decided to go ahead with a single, large recycled group for several reasons. First, because some teachers would not be able to attend every session, attendance would probably even itself out over the months to come. I also was not prepared to spend the extra time to start at "ground zero" at every teachers' meeting to bring members up to speed on what their counterparts in the other group had done at a previous meeting. In addition, the dynamic of the larger group would blend new and longer-term teachers, bringing out a full range

of claims, concerns, and issues. Veteran teachers would be able to speak of the history of the school, and new teachers would contribute fresh observations.

As for the size of the groups, I must take exception to what Guba and Lincoln (1981) stated:

> The danger in interviewing a number of people at one time is that either everyone may want to talk at once or certain members of the group being interviewed may defer to stronger or more vocal members. A second danger is that the group may become too large to allow for much give-and-take with the interviewer. Generally speaking, the larger the group, the more opportunity exists that one or two vocal members will dominate the others and that the interviewer will be unable to control for this because he cannot keep track of individuals' names. Our own experience has shown that having only three or four people in a group interview probably works best. (p. 161)

In my study there are a number of factors that counterindicated this. I was familiar with the majority of the teachers, and therefore I felt confident that I would be able to recognize their voices on tape. Furthermore, gathering circles as I conceived them would not be adversarial or free-for-all discussions. Based on the traditional talking circle, the rule of the gathering circle would be turn-taking among participants in which each circle member would be allowed to speak uninterrupted. In practice, I found that once group members understood this simple rule, interruptions and over-speaking rarely occurred. Finally, it should be pointed out that gathering circles were not so much group interviews as they were *meetings*. My role was facilitator, not interviewer in the traditional sense. It was not my role to be the primary inquisitor, but rather to initiate self-inquiry among the participants. My role became inquisitorial only when I attempted to clarify meaning.

Testing the Parental Waters

In anticipation of meeting with the larger gathering circles, I wanted to begin with several individual interviews in order to get some sense of the issues, concerns, and claims of community members. In my second week in the community I interviewed a parent who also happened to a school employee. When asked whether she had any issues, concerns, or claims, she told me that she was concerned about the fact that the Chief and band council were also the *de facto* school board—"wearing two hats." She felt that the school board should be a separate and distinct entity with three-year terms to provide board members with sufficient time to think about their roles and to start to make an impact on the school. (This concern, along with school discipline, would become the most frequently voiced among *all* groups.)

This parent also had strong views about school suspensions. According to her, an intervention committee should be organized to deal with matters of student discipline, and there should be no suspensions from the school under any circumstances. Student suspensions only made matters worse. Instead, there should be an intervention program set up in the school for serious cases, with a committee consisting of Elders, school representatives, parents, and the community counselor. I was continually surprised by the community members' detailed and well-thought-out suggestions for improving the school. It was this caliber of thoughtfulness that I hoped they would bring to the gathering circles.

That same afternoon I met with a veteran teacher who shared her views on instructional leadership and professional development. As with the parent, her concerns and solutions were detailed and obviously the products of long consideration.

First Circle Gathering

In the third week of the new semester the teachers' group met for their first gathering circle. With the exception of two or three teachers, everyone was in attendance. I expressed my appreciation, with hopes that as time progressed, they would come to better understand the process and come to appreciate that this journey required an open mind, openness to negotiation and values differences, and a willingness to share their thoughts and feelings about matters of common concern.

With a few exceptions, the teachers' gathering circle went well. Low salaries and student discipline were matters of concern for this group. I explained to the teachers that I did not want the gathering circles to be a venue to beat up any individual or group. I said:

> I think it's okay to reflect on the past, examine with care injustices and errors of omission (or perhaps incompetence), but we must not point fingers. Our goal is to build bridges to a better future for the children of this community. Let this image be our guide!

However, one Native teacher was very offended by the nature of the conversation when the group began talking about past school boards. She thought that because the former board members were not at the gathering circle to defend themselves, it was unfair to put them down. I assured her that she should not take offence and that comments about what the board did in the past had little to do with the current board.

I was somewhat alarmed with some teachers' low morale as I chatted with them in the school the day following their first gathering circle. With no discipline plan in place, teachers were already having problems with some students. When asked about the previous day's gathering circle, a teacher stated that he thought it went well, but that everyone was tired of the many years of trying different approaches at the school, only to

have the school board change the rules arbitrarily, often without notice. Teachers had been quite discouraged with student discipline plans over the years.

I had not thought that low teacher morale would be a serious obstacle in this study, but over the weeks, exhaustion and apathy among the educators would reduce the size of the teachers' group by half at some meetings.

Students

The following day I had an opportunity to talk to some senior high school students recommended to me by one of the teachers. This was not a gathering circle *per se*, but rather an impromptu interview. We talked about their claims, concerns, and issues. Some of the issues and concerns raised by this group were the need for more gym equipment and the problem of elementary students running in the senior high hallway. Suggested solutions for the latter problem were to make the hall off limits to younger students and introducing hall monitors.

The lack of discipline frustrated these students. Native schools are "no good," they said. "You can get away with anything here." The county high school, they claimed, was different from the reserve school in that rules were strictly enforced there. When I asked if they thought the strict enforcement of rules was a good thing, they replied, "Yeah, because if you want to learn, you have to be more responsible." They offered concrete suggestions on how discipline problems could be corrected and punished. The students also had definite ideas about new curricula, including courses in arts and crafts, cosmetology, and drivers' education, and ways to improve attendance.

The following day I asked the senior high teacher if I could take the last five minutes of his morning class to talk to the Grade 11 and 12 students to describe the project and to ask if anyone would be interested in participating. I introduced myself and explained my work. The majority of the students appeared unmoved by my enthusiasm for the project. In the end five students offered to meet regularly for the project. I gave them notes containing a brief description of the project and a space for their parents' signatures. We agreed that we would meet the next day immediately following classes. None of the five showed up. I was very disappointed. In the following days I discovered that some of the students had simply forgotten the meeting, and others had been unable to stay after school.

The Problem of Habitual Disempowerment

The school caretakers' group troubled me. Of all the various groups, they were the least willing to offer solutions for concerns they had identified. Their reluctance was perplexing. I believed that they had solutions in mind, but refused to state them. I came to believe that the members of this group, so long accustomed to playing a subservient role in the school, were reluctant to take the lead when faced with an avenue to make positive changes. I was profoundly disturbed by the pervasiveness of a submissive mind-set among this group and was unsure how to empower them.

Outside of the gathering circle the head maintenance worker approached me one morning (I have known him for many years) and asked me whether it would it would be reasonable for him to ask the Director of Education whether he could attend a maintenance training session. It seemed odd that he would ask *me* such a question. I told

him that I thought it was reasonable for maintenance workers to attend workshops and that usually there is a portion of the maintenance budget set aside for such purposes. This gentleman's cautious question, put to me, a neutral outsider, was indicative of the reticence of support staff in the school to suggest improvements, but it also indicated that these workers were not always aware of ways in which they could improve their performance and their understanding of their jobs. They seem timid about drawing the attention of their superiors or asking for anything that might jeopardize their positions.

Managers

Because of their positions of authority in their respective areas, it was necessary to interview community administrators and managers privately. I was anxious before these interviews because some of these individuals had been pointedly cool toward my study from the beginning. However, on the whole, the interviews went well.

In fact, the official who had seemed the most inimical to my study, during the interview expressed some unexpected issues and concerns. For example, I was surprised to learn that this official also wanted to see a separate Board of Education, and this person raised the thorny issue of nominal rolls. (Federal schools have only one nominal roll count per year—on September 30th. Nonfederal schools in the area had two nominal roll counts, one in September and another in February, to account for the mobility of students from one school to another. Two nominal rolls for the reserve school would probably result in funding more reflective of the real population of the school.) This official admitted to having wanted to vent these issues for a long time.

Organizing the Parents' Groups

Although a parent notice had been sent home a few weeks earlier, few parents responded. I hoped that another open invitation sent home with the students would yield better results. Even those people I met almost daily on the reserve were reticent to commit to a "sit-down." I had to try as many different communication methods as possible to attract participants.

Every gathering circle that I had held so far had come about as a result of my encouraging and cajoling people to meet with me. Some interviewees seemed indifferent to sitting for an interview with me. I was finding it particularly difficult holding parents to their commitments to meet with me. No sooner did I confirm an appointment with members of a parents' group than they either did not show up for the meeting or would arrive only to say that they could not stay because of one emergency or another. It was discouraging.

My luck changed somewhat while I was at the health clinic waiting to be summoned into a meeting with health staff about the study. A community member approached me, keen to talk to me about the school. She asked for details about the study, and we spoke for about 10 minutes. I invited her to a small parents' gathering circle scheduled for the next day. Because she was the coordinator of a community parent support group, she offered that group's meeting space as a possible gathering area. It proved to be an ideal space. This member would also be instrumental in organizing the Young Mothers group.

Elders and Protocol

One community member, one of the most important gatekeepers I came to know on the reserve, was instrumental in organizing an Elder gathering circle for me. She was also invaluable in instructing me in the correct protocol when working with Elders. It is inappropriate to contact Elders without having someone introduce you to them.

I began the meeting with a Native language prayer and a blessing for guidance of our decisions and for all those gathered at the meeting. Tobacco was offered to all members as a sign of respect and friendship. I had been advised that colorful scarves and snacks would also be appropriate gifts. I briefly explained how the resolutions were arrived at in the gathering circle process, detailing the methodology in a simple and straightforward manner.

I hoped that the interview would not take more than two hours. I was concerned about the stamina of the participants, some of whom were frail. The interview focused on questions related to the purpose of schooling in the community and any issues, concerns, and claims that they might have.

The gathering circle with the Elders had a positive impact on the study. After the first Elder meeting, I was waiting in the Training Centre to talk to someone, and a community member asked me my name. When I told her, she said to me, "Oh, my mother said that I should talk to you about your work here." Her mother had been one of the Elders. One cannot underestimate the influence that Elders still have in this community.

Later, I met with the Elders again to present my initial list of resolutions. The gathering began later than I expected. At any rate, I was hoping to have 10 Elders, but

only four remained at the meeting long enough to discuss the first 75 resolutions. The Elders had comments to make on almost every resolution—expanding on the ideas, relating their own life experiences. All of the resolutions discussed with the Elders met with their approval. Some had their doubts as to whether the ideas would work. Some were also initially reluctant to adopt the "crisis intervention idea" because of the recent incident in a nearby community where police tried to intervene in a child custody case, resulting in the death of the mother and boy. However, after some discussion they felt that the police should be only the last resort, that the "peacemakers" (i.e., an intervention group) be known to the family in crisis, and that the intervention crisis committee's purpose and goal be well known to the community. This would hopefully eliminate any undue anxiety on the part of the family members who were experiencing a crisis. In the end, one of the most prominent and outspoken Elders stated that most of the resolutions were "worth a try."

Young Mothers Group

I met with a group of young mothers in a gathering circle, the average age being around 20 years. All had at least one child in school. Many of these participants thought of issues and concerns as being single incidents that occurred to them while at the school, and they were unable at first to convert those often traumatic incidents into generalized issues applicable to other members of the community. After a brief discussion another mother raised a concern about a bus driver. A concern began to emerge from the group that perhaps *all* bus drivers should be required to take additional training.

Paraprofessional Group

I was pleasantly surprised to find that the paraprofessional gathering circle was the most unencumbered when it came to identifying claims, concerns, and issues. The members of this group, all Native residents on the reserve, understood better than most the social problems facing this community because they faced these problems every day in their lives and work. However, although easily able to identify community problems, they proved to be short on how these problems could be resolved. Like the Young Mothers group, they had trouble stepping beyond the immediacy of individual incidents and generalizing them to apply to the greater community. Many of the participants sometimes appeared resigned to the fact that very little could be done to resolve problems. I was saddened by this attitude but also pleased that they were so open with me. Community social problems seemed overwhelming sometimes, especially when viewed through the eyes of some of the participants.

On another occasion the paraprofessional gathering circle appeared tired when I met with them. The session did not appear to be as productive as previous sessions had been, and I sensed the group's interest waning. One participant asked plaintively, "How many more sessions do we have to go to?" I indicated to them that their commitment to the process would involve their coming to resolutions for all of their claims and issues. Members of the group suggested to this participant that this was a real chance to be heard, and the question was not repeated.

Political Discomfort

At one point in the process I became uneasy about some of the resolutions that were being discussed within one gathering circle group. This group felt less reticent than most groups about talking about what must be done to change the political will within the community. The discussion quickly turned to political leaders and the role that they must play in combating social ills on the reserve. The group agreed that community social problems have an impact on the children and the learning that goes on in the school. The discussion began to focus on certain political authorities and their lack of leadership. It was suggested that "someone" (implying a certain political figure on the reserve) needed to run for councilor. I wondered whether the gathering circle was an appropriate forum for discussing specific political strategies. I gently led the group away from discussing political personalities and guided them toward a more general discussion of social problems and leadership.

Catharsis

For some members, these gathering circles were almost therapeutic. They said that the sessions allowed them time to reflect on things. As one participant stated, "It's rush, rush, rush all the time. I don't get a chance to think about the important things in this community." She continued that the gathering circles provide her that special time to reflect about things that matter in her life—the people in her community and the many social problems that face her people.

Another member appreciated the sessions because these "talks" gave her a chance to unload her frustrations concerning the school and the community. The gathering circle

was cathartic for her. Her job was stressful and frustrating at times. She often felt alone in her struggles to change the community.

Hostility

It was suggested that I talk to a certain community member whose children attended a county school off the reserve. This person proved to be very guarded and even hostile when I approached her for an interview. The fact that I carried a tape recorder was an immediate bone of contention. She was adamant about not being interviewed for the study and wondered aloud why I was in the community interviewing people "without permission." I explained several times that I had secured permission from the Chief. This person then asked me who had hired me, and she did not believe me when I explained that my efforts were not costing the band any money and that the study was a project associated with a university program. I was then asked about my previous experience in the community and asked why I was "let go" as principal of the school. I explained that I had not been let go but had resigned to return to university. She was clearly unhappy that yet another study was being done in the community. I was rather stunned by such open hostility, which was far from the norm in a community where most people were outwardly friendly and polite. I could only wonder if this openly hostile attitude toward the study was not reflective of a larger undercurrent of hostility well hidden beneath the community's veneer of politeness. After all, the majority of community members outside the school had chosen not to participate in the study. As I had noted in my journal at one point, "people are not exactly beating a path to my door." There were surely many

reasons for their reticence to participate, but I could not discount hostility toward the study, misguided or otherwise, as a factor.

This community was only 30 kilometers from where I resided, and yet for all practical purposes it might as well have been light years away. Though I had taught there for several years and spent over eleven months among the people while doing this study, I still felt like a stranger in their midst. I was an outsider. When my work was done, I would return to my world.

Perhaps it was my discomfort with the obvious political implications of some of the issues being discussed in the gathering circles, but as my work advanced, I felt increasingly mixed feelings every time I approached the band office. I think I felt that my loyalties within the community were becoming divided—divided between the Chief, who had trusted me in the first place to do this work; the people, who were struggling to better themselves and the lot of their children in an often inimical system; and the community and the school staff, to whom I, as an educator myself, felt a collegial sympathy.

Generally, I was welcomed in this community as I went about my business. But a vague insecurity gnawed at me while I was there. I was welcomed, and yet I felt unwelcome. A few people made sure that I felt uncomfortable in certain situations. At a gathering with the Elders, a member of the community (not an Elder) came to share in the lunch. This member looked at me and, in the Native language, asked the Native person standing next to me what I was doing there. She replied, also in the Native language, "You ask him; he's right there!" This interchange was explained to me shortly after the fact. I felt hurt, clumsy, frustrated, guilty, and speechless.

And yet I was surprised at how open and willing the participants were in talking to me about issues that affected their lives. This was also the role of the outsider, as a disinterested listener. In explaining their realities to me, they were in fact explaining their reality to themselves. This was truly an amazing realization for me. Whenever I met with a gathering circle, I continued to be shocked at how straightforward and candid community members were in their responses.

Community Involvement, Action Research, and Methodology

The processes of having gathering circles once a week was an empowering event for the various groups and group members involved, individually and collectively. Individually, the members began to reflect deeply on the nature of the issues in the community and began thinking of creative solutions for school and social problems. Collectively, the members had more knowledge and assumed joint responsibility for arriving at solutions to school-related problems.

The purpose of this study was not to be a single intervention that addressed only school issues, but rather an attempt to look at wider issues within the community that were in many cases the root of school problems. The aim of this research was empowerment by means of participatory action focused on the solution to a problem by means of action and critical reflection by those who were most affected by the problem. Previously, evaluation efforts imposed divisiveness between community members and those least affected by day-to-day educational efforts—the school board. "A research process that extracts information from individuals in isolation from one another and aggregates this into a single set of figures does so at the expense of reducing the

complexity and richness of human experience" (Hall, 1975, p. 25). And like Hall, who wrote, "On a pragmatic level, I was interested in a study that could potentially have tangible results, involving improving the quality of [educational] life, but not research for the sake of research" (p. 72), I wanted my study to make a real difference in the lives of the people of this community.

The researcher's role is to get people's knowledge to the surface by asking them questions and getting them to articulate the school problems, why these problems came to be, and how these problems might be resolved. I did not say to them that we were engaging in action research, but I spoke to them in a way that acknowledged that they knew more about the problems facing the school than I did and that I wanted to work with them to find solutions. When the parents were unable to identify what they saw as being an issue or a concern, I was able to play a small role. Far more important was my understanding of decision making in the community that made my role a catalytic one.

How did I insert myself as a facilitator? I began by asking community groups whether they were interested in participating in a study of school improvement. I explained the nature of my research and began the process by asking questions:

1. What is the purpose of schooling on the reserve?
2. Do you have any issues or concerns with respect to the school?
3. What are these issues and concerns for you, and how did they come about?
4. How could these issues and concerns be resolved?
5. Do you have any claims?

Each question was discussed in gathering circles of varying sizes. Each group reflected on each of the issues raised. Sometimes issues were discussed, and, as a group, they

decided to reframe them. These decisions were mutual and consensual. There was time for analysis-action-reflection-action.

Brennan and Noffke (1997) explained their understanding of action research:

> Action research is a highly personal as well as political activity. It is not merely a technique—an instrument or method for educational research. Rather, we see it as a way to problematize many of the assumptions and practices of social research, including educational research. . . . We do not, however, suggest that action research is automatically 'liberatory': like any other social practice it can be used for co-option and for avoiding action on significant issues. However, in our view, the push to become explicit about our practices and make them problematic, in an action research group is more likely than with other forms of research and reform to contribute to greater equality within the group as well as to better our understanding of the issues involved and the improvement of practice. (p. 23)

Neutrality: Managing Cultural Bias While Facilitating

It must be understood that I did not enter this community with a set of specific questions of my own. I did not arrive to interrogate the participants out of my own speculations. My mandate was to allow the people to formulate their own questions concerning education and to allow them to answer those questions from their own wisdom and experience. My task was to facilitate that internal colloquy and to create a method best suited to that task.

The facilitating method itself had to be either culturally neutral or culturally specific (or, perhaps more accurately, situationally neutral or specific). But although the framework of the method could be neutral, I knew that my own questions, formulated from my cultural background, could never achieve neutrality. To inquire into the educational needs and aspiration of this community entirely from my perspective (White,

academic, educator) would be to contaminate the field. The form and content of a question already begin to color every possible response to that question before it is asked.

I feared that even my need to clarify (by questioning) the meaning of what was being said in the meetings might influence those clarifications. I had to strive as much as possible to remove my own bias from my questioning. This was not always easy; sometimes it was impossible. Although I tried hard not to influence the discussion, I describe two examples where this occurred.

Many of the meetings began with my asking, "What are some of your issues and concerns related to the school?" I regarded this question as virtually neutral, and for all practical purposes it could be considered as part of the framework of the method. It was simply a prompt, and other than containing the limiting factors of "your issues and concerns" and "related to the school," it was empty of any specific content pertaining to what might actually be discussed. It defined the field of enquiry without defining my expectations of what direction, within the field, the enquiry would take.

At one meeting, to the opening prompt ("What are some of your issues and concerns related to the school?"), a member replied, "I think we have already outlined the issue—parental involvement." My response to this was, "What do you mean by that?" This was also a neutral question, empty of theme-specific content, and intended only to prompt the member to expand and clarify his thoughts in his own words.

"Not necessarily involvement but awareness," the member replied.

"Can you explain that a little more?" I asked (another neutral prompt).

"How children are behaving in school and their academics," the member replied.

At this point I did not know what meaning the member was trying to convey. I found these responses to my prompts to be genuinely cryptic. Anyone who has conducted interviews, no matter how informally, has experienced cases in which the respondent chooses to reply to prompts for information with short, cryptic locutions or with monosyllables—yes, no, maybe, I guess. There can be many reasons for these cryptic or abbreviated responses: general nervousness or shyness, inexperience in formulating complex ideas into words, fear of not meeting the interviewer's expectations, fear of not answering "correctly," fear of being limited or trapped by a specific response, fear of expressing an opinion that might be ridiculed by others or that might set the respondent apart from peers (this is especially true in a group setting), or even feelings of antagonism toward the interviewer, anger over the situation of the interview, or anger directed toward others, present or absent. And, in many cases, short, cryptic responses may result from the respondent's belief that his meaning should be self-evident to his audience. The idea behind the respondent's words are so well established in his or her mind that there is a feeling that a few significant keywords are enough to convey that idea to others. This may indeed be true in situations in which a peer group or culture group generally shares an idea or belief. Persons who have shared an experience can discuss that experience in fewer words than can those who have not. Difficulty arises, however, if the interviewer is not a member of that peer group or if the group or group member is required to formulate those tacitly understood ideas in writing (written language, in the absence of vocal nuances, facial expression, body language, and other nonverbal cues, is less conductive of "implied" meaning) or in spoken words aimed at an audience beyond the group. What is

self-evident to the respondent and his peers may not be evident at all to the facilitator or others.

Faced with a series of short and fragmented responses, the facilitator must identify those terms that seem most heavily laden with meaning and combine them into a more specific request for clarification. In this case I picked up the key concept (parental awareness) in the member's last responses and fed them back in the form of a question. "So you are saying that parents need to be more aware?" I asked.

At this point there is always the danger that the facilitator, by choosing the wrong keywords or key concept, will color the question in such a way as to influence the respondent to answer in a certain way, just to appease the facilitator's sense of what is important. (In hindsight, I was guilty of this from time to time.) A way to avoid this is to offer the member a choice of follow-up questions. In this case I might have better asked the member to discuss the difference between parental involvement and parental awareness. I might have given the member a choice by asking something like, "Are you saying that parents need to be more aware? And what's the difference between awareness and involvement?"

As it was, the members at this meeting were not prepared to let this issue slide or to appease me with easy answers. In fact, this was the beginning of a very aggressive but important exchange among several members on the essence of valuation of the education that their children were receiving.

"So you are saying that parents need to be more aware?" I asked.

"Yeah, in academics and attendance," the member responded.

"I don't think it's awareness," said another member. "I think it all boils down to parents. Academic-wise, I think that teachers should expect more from their students."

"I understand what [the previous member] is saying. You are saying something a little different—maybe it's a new issue?"

What I was failing to grasp at that moment was that the matter of parental awareness and involvement and the matter of teachers' academic expectations of students were linked in the minds of these members, as I would soon see. My attempt to define teachers' academic expectations of students as a new issue was premature.

The member replied, "Okay, what I am saying is parents should be more involved about homework. Parents should be more involved with education."

"For their child's education?" asked another member.

"Yeah," replied the previous member. "They should be concerned on a daily or weekly [basis]. Step by step. . . . Parents should be aware of their children's progress."

"So what we are talking about here is that parents should be more aware of these things we are talking about?" I asked, trying to redefine the issue. I was still not sure where this discussion was going and was trying to limit it in my own terms.

The member said, "For me, I would ask, 'Is my child learning what he is supposed to at the Grade 1 level or the Grade 2 level?' Teachers have to make sure that the children are learning at their grade level."

"We are going in circles," commented another member. And that member was correct, in a way. He had identified the circular or reciprocal nature of the relationship between parental awareness and of what specifically the parent should be aware. It was not enough to say that parents should be more aware or more involved without defining

what they should be specifically aware of or involved in. I was slowly beginning to get a sense of direction in the issue. I decided to try to expand the issue slightly by asking the members to consider the teacher's role in the equation.

"What role should teachers play in this process?" I asked.

"The teacher's role is to monitor the children's progress," replied a member.

"Testing," said another.

> I don't know [said the member who had previously talked about grade levels]. What I am trying to get at is that my niece [now] sends her Grade 1 son to D.S. [an off-reserve school]. She says that he was at a real high level here [in the reserve school], but when he went over there he was placed at a lower level.

"So we are talking about assessment?" I suggested.

"Yes," said one member.

"Grade 12 not being Grade 12. Grade 12 being more like Grade 10!" exclaimed another member.

"Are we also talking about the evaluation of students according to some standard?" I asked. "Classroom evaluation standards?"

"Not *classroom* evaluation," the member said pointedly, "*individual* evaluation!"

What was becoming clear was that when these members were talking about awareness and involvement, what they wanted most was the primary assurance that their children were performing at the expected level; but more than that, they wanted the assurance that that standard at the reserve school was the same standard applied to students in a mixed public school only a few miles off the reserve. It was clear that they did not feel this assurance. They felt that the teachers in the reserve school were fudging standards, demanding less of their students than their counterparts at neighboring schools.

This was a complex issue. On the one hand, if more parental awareness and involvement were permitted by teachers or sought after by parents, then parents would be in a position to know that their children were meeting the school's standards. There was really no excuse for not being in possession of that information. On the other hand, *no* amount of involvement in the local school would give the parents the assurance that the school's standards were the same as standards elsewhere. Local involvement would not give parents a basis for comparison. There was no mechanism by which parents could compare the reserve school to other schools except through anecdotal information ("my niece says . . ."). Only the results of standardized testing of students or of a rigorous standard evaluation of the school in comparison to other schools would give parents that information. The real question on these members' minds was, "Is our school as good as other schools in the province, and if not, why?" They were already certain that it was not as good, and they suspected that the reason for this was that the teachers were not demanding enough of students.

But before I could begin to formulate these thoughts into follow-up questions for these members, the discussion became even more complicated when a member made a statement that defined the central paradox of this community's view of education.

> Okay, and with that [the previous statement about evaluations], I have a statement I want to make: It's a curriculum [that is needed]. A curriculum based on Aboriginal people. A curriculum that is built by and for Aboriginal people. You see, one of our problems in this community is keeping up with Alberta Learning standards. And our standards and the Alberta Learning standards are totally different. I would like to see a curriculum that will benefit our children, and by that I mean with a Native background.

One of the central paradoxes of this community's view of education was their desire that their school be unique and specific to their cultural needs, while at the same time maintaining academic standards identical to every other school in the level of education it provided to students. On the surface that does not seem to be an unreasonable demand. But among the difficulties inherent in this is the question of who will decide what *are* the community's unique and specific cultural needs. Traditionalists wanted more Native language studies and a curriculum based on Native life. Religionists wanted more religious instruction and an emphasis on morals. Both of these groups seemed willing to sacrifice mainstream viability (to varying degrees) to achieve their philosophical ideals.

At this point I temporarily surrendered any attempt to guide the discussion into narrow parameters. Sensing that I had tapped a rich vein of feeling, it seemed best to allow the members to follow their thoughts wherever they led. The data could be separated into relevant issues later. However, I did feel compelled to make the members think about the paradox of same but different standards. I said, "I understand the problem. Is it possible to have a home-grown curriculum including provincial standards of reading, writing, and arithmetic?"

Another member said, "I think what he is saying is, you could use our society, instead of White society, but the standards would be the same."

"*Is* that what you are saying?" I asked the previous member.

The member replied:

> I am saying that we have been through quite a bit. That is not being taken into account. That is what I am saying. By being through quite a bit, I mean, over the years, the way our people have been set up in this country. The way we were

> educated in this country. We have been through quite a bit. We are still going through quite a bit. We are not properly addressed as a nation. We don't have a voice. Like, "Here is the curriculum; take it!" That's it. And for my people, that's not what we want. We want a curriculum that says, "Hey, we're like this."

"You want a curriculum that honors your history," I suggested naïvely.

"A curriculum that fits," replied a member.

"A curriculum that we can use when we go camping and stuff," said another member.

"Do you want a total divorce from Alberta Learning standards?" I asked, admittedly taken aback. I realize that my surprise colored both the tone and the form of the question. I was reacting out of my perspective as an educator imbued in a Western view of academics, shocked by the suggestion of rejecting that system entirely. I could have phrased the question in a more neutral way, and I think that the form and the tone of my question somewhat cowed at least one of the members, who replied, "No, I am saying we could use some of their things, but we have things, too." I am fairly certain that "using some of their things" was meant more to appease my shock than out of a real desire to accommodate Alberta Learning in a Native-based curriculum.

"I think we have to utilize who we are in order to learn from it," said another member. "Our history, our way of life, and use it and educate ourselves with it. We need something we can relate to, something that kids can relate to in class."

"Something that will make them feel comfortable," another member responded. "The comfort zone. Something that promotes identity."

Someone else stated:

> For example, our vocabulary at the reserve level is totally different compared to the vocabulary in Edmonton. If you live on a reserve, there are kids using all of

> those words that are different from those that Alberta Learning uses in their curriculum. And when we come to [the rest of] the curriculum, it gets twice as hard. What I am saying is to use our standards and incorporate them into the children's education.

"So you are saying that this new curriculum should still prepare the children here for the world outside?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so," said a member. "You have to."

"So instead of talking about escalators in the West Edmonton Mall, the local curriculum would talk about hunting?" I asked.

> Well, this is reality here [said a member]. Is it good or bad for kids going to D.S. [a school off the reserve that teaches a mainstream public curriculum] being taught a different curriculum than here in the long run? Is it good for kids that went there from elementary up?

"The kids that go to school here have something to fall back on," said another member. "Is that good or bad?"

To this I replied:

> It is neither good nor bad. It is a parental choice. If parents decide to send their children to an outside school, that is their choice. But the majority of the parents in this community have decided to send their children to this school. That's a choice that they make.

I am not sure why I felt the need to be insistent on this point, to the point of lecturing the members. I was rattled by the passion of this discussion and by how willingly some of these members would cast away the traditional (*my* tradition, not theirs) form of schooling for something else. I suppose that my insistence on saying that there was no good or bad valuation in the choice between schools was an instinctive reaction *against* these members' desperate need for firm educational values. Were the standards in this school different from those in other Alberta schools? Was it good or bad for the children

to be sent to a public school off the reserve? I could not answer these questions empirically, considering the lack of hard data and, more important, the lack of a definition of what is "good" and what is "bad" for the community's children (and good and bad from whose perspective?). At that moment no one could answer those questions logically. That does not mean that those questions do not have real answers. I think that I was rattled by the thought that these members would answer these questions for themselves based on nothing but feelings. But then, was that not what this process was meant to reveal, their feelings about education? I will admit to feeling somewhat lost and frustrated when my own values and my own notions of logic ran contrary to those of the groups I was facilitating. It was in those moments that I was reminded that I was an outsider in this culture. Perhaps there was good and bad in the choice of schools—but I had to remind myself that in this case it could not be *my* good or bad. I was probably wrong in telling these members that there was no good or bad in this issue. If there are no good or bad choices, then there can be no valuation, and decision becomes a flip of a coin.

I should point out that this same meeting got bogged down in pessimism toward the end of the session. There was a feeling that no matter what was resolved intellectually, the problems themselves would remain unsolved due to a lack of will or a lack of interest by community members. The participants in this meeting quickly fell back on draconian measures, such as taking children away from parents who refused to participate in greater school involvement or stopping their welfare cheques, or to the other extreme of paying neglectful parents the hourly minimum wage to participate in their children's schooling. There was a feeling that the community was still too damaged

by the traumas of the past and that these problems were too large to ever be solved. The group did come back again to the idea that teachers were not setting a standard for the children of the local school comparable to standards set for students elsewhere. It was pointed out that children in the local school were advanced to the next grade regardless of a very poor attendance record and poor academic performance. This lack of enforced standards in the local school would also recur in subsequent meetings.

The matter of enforced standards in the local school often became a watershed of paradoxical feeling and was often linked with the need for an Aboriginal curriculum. Although it was felt that a Native-based curriculum was needed, enforcing standards of the current Alberta curriculum was seen as way of judging the value of the education that their children were receiving. Teachers' lower expectations of children in the local school were seen as a form of racism or as a sign of a lack of specialized teaching skills. It was felt that White teachers were never trained to deal with the specific problems of Native students. On the one hand, parents were willing to admit that the current teachers were doing the best that they could; but, on the other hand, the best that they could do was not good enough. "The screening and hiring of teachers," said one member at another meeting, "should be based on Native teaching experience and knowledge."

Another occasion when I misread cultural clues was in the case of one group's ideas about an independent school board. I asked whether anyone wanted to address the topic, and a member said that the school board should consist of parents, Elders, and teachers.

"Elders should be represented on the school board?" I asked, somewhat surprised, though I should not have been.

"And we should have teachers," the member reiterated.

"That will present a conflict of interest," I said instantly, thinking in a completely Western way, in terms of labor and management. I should have asked the member why he thought that teachers needed to be represented on the school board and then whether he thought that there might be a conflict of interest and what that would mean to the board and the school. Instead, I was too ready to close down the possibility. The member glumly accepted my veto of his idea. In hindsight, it was a missed opportunity.

I asked whether anyone else had ideas on the subject of the school board. I asked whether, for instance, the political leadership of the community should have a representative on the board. "Maybe a band councilor?" I suggested.

"Maybe a watchdog," said a member. "I don't know about a councilor. The councilor could override certain topics."

"Do you think so?" I asked. I then suggested that if they had Elders and parents on the board, a politician might have a tough time swaying the group one way or another. I was about to be given a lesson in the complexity of this community's power structure. Later in this same meeting I would be told that if you did not have political power in the community, you were a nobody.

"The councilor could only be there as an intermediary and not for decision making," said a member. "Just to bring information back and forth to council. I think most decisions should be made by parents and Elders."

I asked how big the board should be.

"Clan members!" responded a member. Confused, I asked him what he meant. "Families," she said. "I'd say about ten, maybe eight." Another member named the clans

and enumerated them at "about ten." "A representative from each clan," agreed the first member.

Once again, thinking from my own bias, I strongly suggested that a group that big would have trouble making decisions.

"Yeah, but that is what a board of education is there for," retorted a member. "To make big decisions. And sometimes you cannot make decisions without clan involvement."

Another member explained that if all the clans were not represented, there would come a point where a certain clan member would say, "I wasn't informed of this." All clans had to be seen to be a part of the decision-making process. "I think it would be best if each clan was represented," the member concluded.

I was still unprepared to accept the idea of a board that large. I told them that in my own community the school board consisted of six members, requiring four members for a quorum. I asked if it would not be more difficult to get a quorum with a larger board. I then asked, if there were 10 clan representatives on the board, how many Elders there should be.

"I think it would be best if the Elders picked who was going to represent the clans," a member said.

"Yes, but how many Elders should there be on the board?" I asked.

To my surprise, a member said that he did not think that there should be any Elders on the board, and other members seemed to agree. Once again I was confused. "No Elders, just parents," said another member. "But the Elders should have a say in who is representing on the board," said another member. Whoever the Elders chose will report

back to the Elders." He explained that the clan representative would report back to that clan's Elder to

> let them know what was going on in . . . the school board, and what decisions have been made. And [to] find suggestions and problem solving from the Elders. The reason why I included the Elders is because they are the ones who have wisdom. They are the ones who are wise in terms of making decisions and solving problems.

"Okay," I said, "so shouldn't we have at least one Elder on the board?"

"If you have one, then you will have to have them all," said a member, smiling.

"Having just one would be a conflict of interest," replied another member slyly.

"So it is better if the Elders pick the board," the previous member maintained. Another member explained that the Elder-selected school board should also meet with the Elders regularly, at the Elder's Committee meeting.

"So before the school board can make a decision, they have to consult with the Elders?" I asked. "Then the Elders might as well be on the school board!"

The group laughed at my perplexity.

"The board . . . should be able to make autonomous decisions," I insisted, "following established protocol and procedures."

What I did not see at the time was that the structure that these members were describing for their ideal school board was probably identical to the political and decision-making structure that prevailed in this culture before the intrusion of Western notions of parliamentary procedure and popular democratic elections that seemed to cause so much unrest and ill-feeling in the community each time a new band council was elected. The members were describing a nonelected authority that represented all the

clans and was under the wise guidance of the Elders. My assumption that such a large group would have difficulty making decisions was clearly based only on my own bias, and, in retrospect, the decision-making procedure that they were describing was no more complex than the gathering circle method we were using! I believe that my obvious perplexity and impatience at their description of the structure and my insistence that parts of it were not feasible eventually swayed this group to abandon their model as too complex. If so, I erred seriously in not being more open to their suggestions. A school board based on traditional structure might have acted as an anodyne to the divisiveness of an elected band council. Such a school board might have proved to be a point of healing for this community. As it happened, the proposal for an independent school board was, in the end, vetoed by the band council, making its form a moot point for the present.

Reflecting on the beginning of this exchange, when the first member said that he thought that the board should consist of parents, teachers, and Elders, it is obvious that my understanding of the words *consist of* was different from his. To me, a board *consisted* of a finite number of elected or appointed members. To the people of this group, the board was an elastic entity, consisting not only of its officially seated members, but also extended clan affiliations, overseeing Elders, and a muzzled band council watchdog that acted as a go-between. I am sure that if I had not been so abrupt in dismissing teacher involvement, these members would have also included educators and other school staff in some shadow capacity on the board. This tendency toward inclusiveness among the people of this community was a notable strength. That is the nature of political power there. When a member said you were a "nobody" if you had no political power, he was not referring only to the power of elected band councilors, but

also to the power possessed by anyone who had influence with leaders, Elders, or important clan members. There were very few complete nobodies on this reserve.

Groupthink and Group Polarization

Two dangers of which I had to be aware in facilitating these groups were *group polarization* and *groupthink* (Nelson & Quick, 1999, p. 299). Group polarization is described as the tendency for group discussions to shift toward more extreme attitudes. Groupthink is the conformist tendency of members of a group or organization to adopt (or merely express) similar thoughts and opinions. To prevent group polarization and groupthink, our gathering circles utilized brainstorming, "a technique for generating as many ideas as possible on a given subject, while suspending evaluation until all the ideas have been suggested" (p. 300). The participants in the gathering circles were encouraged to build on ideas of others. I also played the role of devil's advocate, taking "the role of critic during decision making" (p. 301). When necessary I also initiated a *dialectical inquiry*, which Nelson and Quick defined as "debate between two opposing sets of recommendations" (p. 301). When using this method, I made sure that no one in the debate felt that they were in a win-lose situation. This was accomplished by not attributing suggestions or recommendations to any one individual. Positions were never designated as "Joe's idea" or "Mary's suggestion." Once an idea was in free play, its origin was considered irrelevant. This discipline of anonymity was maintained to the best of everyone's ability throughout the process. To my knowledge, although groups occasionally adopted these positions, as in my description above, group polarization and groupthink played no significant role in the gathering circles.

Non-prioritization of Issues

Some community members asked why the list of resolutions had not been prioritized. I responded that all resolutions offered by the various gathering circles merited equal consideration because they had been discussed and dialogued thoroughly in each circle. I asked how they would feel if two of their resolutions were not included because another gathering circle thought that they did not merit consideration.

One health care professional, after reviewing the resolution list, also stated that the resolution list items should have been *weighted* according to importance. Because my approach was more qualitative in nature and the aim had been to include as wide an input of ideas as possible followed by consensus on what the resolutions should be, all resolutions had to be regarded as having equal value orientation though coming from various value systems and perspectives. Indeed, some items were more informed than others; some items addressed issues of more immediate concern than others; some issues could probably be characterized as vital and others as trivial, depending on one's perspective; but to ensure fairness and consensus, all the resolutions had to be given equal consideration. All voices had to be heard on an equal basis.

In fact, during individual gathering circles we did temporarily order items for discussion. This was done to marshal the groups' time effectively and to eliminate redundant discussions in which issues overlapped. Such temporary prioritization had no effect on the ultimate package of resolutions.

Obviously priorities varied from group to group within the community. Going into the study, I was led to believe that religion in the local school was a divisive issue in reflecting the division between Christian religionists and Native traditionalists. But as I

gathered data, I saw that this issue was of greatest concern to a few political leaders in the community and not necessarily to the community as a whole. The people seemed to accommodate themselves easily to either formalism in public, shifting between Christian and traditional trappings and imagery. Often the question of Christian or traditionalist symbolism was settled by the person in charge of a proceeding. For instance, large formal gathering circles involving Elders, the school board, or the Chief and council (intergroup meetings) began with a prayer in the Native language. These meetings were viewed as important gatherings requiring spiritual direction. Community members believed that such guidance was essential to the success of the meeting and process. Smudging (thurification—the burning of sage and other aromatics), however, occurred only during gathering circles with the Chief and council, reflecting a more traditionalist influence. However, when a Christian community member assisted with the organization of Elder gathering circles, that meeting began with a prayer.

Completing Resolution Lists and Extending Deadlines

I received a call from one group member saying that several members of that group needed more time to complete their reactions to their respective lists. They had been requested to look at the list of resolutions and to agree, disagree, or attempt to modify each one. I expressed appreciation for the call and suggested that the following Monday would be a suitable extension. She agreed. I advised the other members of the new deadline. By that point in the study I was spending a good part of each day on the reserve reminding participants to finish their resolution feedback surveys.

It was proving rather difficult to get some groups, such as the paraprofessionals, to return their resolution lists. I resorted to sending a note to tardy participants that read:

> Dear Participant: I am hoping to begin analysis of the 'resolution list' information shortly. Over the next several days, will you have an opportunity to complete your resolution list and return to me? I apologize for bothering you because I know that you are very busy. I am, however, honored by your involvement in this project.

As I reviewed and analyzed the completed resolution lists, I saw that some respondents had checked off none of the choices. From my previous conversations with group members, I knew that this form of opting-out was motivated either by an unwillingness to venture into what was perceived to be dangerous political areas or, in some cases, by the feeling that they had no right to be involved in other peer groups' issues. One member stated that he would not answer any of the "political" resolutions on the list. He characterized those resolutions as a "mine field." I stated that the school board seemed adamant about making positive changes. He stated that, in his experience, they could change their minds in a moment. Of course, I could not compel this participant to do what he thought was against his own self-interest.

Some participants needed more information or clarification before deciding on their position vis-à-vis certain resolutions. Because various resolutions had arisen within one group or another, members of other groups were not always privy to the reasoning behind those resolutions. It was my task to offer clarification if I could. This sometimes resulted in participants' answering resolutions that they would otherwise not have answered or, in some cases, changing their response.

However, some participants wanted details of precisely how some resolutions would be put into practice. This was difficult to answer. I had to remind them that the

specifics of how some resolutions would be implemented would have to come from the educators, community members, and political authorities, and not from me. The intention of the resolution list was not to provide exhaustive detail, but rather a set of agreed issues, claims, and concerns to be used as guiding principles in reforming the education system and the welfare of the children in it. The community could only work out the details in time as they struggled creatively with the identified concerns. I had to remind them that they all needed to become leaders; they could not look to me, an outsider, for leadership.

Contagious Ideas

A member told me of a meeting that she had just had with school authorities. They had been brainstorming ideas of how parents could be more involved in the school. One idea was to meet with all of the parents at a local retreat. Guest speakers would be invited to talk about parenting skills and so on. Parents would be asked how they thought they could become more involved in the school. Meetings of this nature were expected to occur several times during the course of the school year. This sounded very much like some of the ideas generated by the gathering circles. I was to see several instances of this "contagion of ideas" in which department heads and other school authorities tried to anticipate the ideas coming from the gathering circles. I hoped that they were doing so out of the recognition of the appropriateness of the ideas and not simply as a way to preempt the findings of the study. At this point there was still a strong sense among certain officials that this study would be another exercise in finger pointing.

Power

There is little doubt in my mind that community-based action research is about power and authority: how power is used, why it is used the way it is, and to what end. Historically, since local management of the school in the early 1990s, power has been used as a vehicle for control. "We are now in charge," has been the battle cry of the school board. The control of budget information is a case in point. When local managers (e.g., the school principal) are not aware of how much money is allocated by the band council to certain budget categories, they are handcuffed as far as practical planning is concerned. For whatever reason, the Chief and council have been reluctant to delegate fiscal power to managers. During the course of my study, there was, however, a gradual loosening of information to the school principal and a greater willingness to allow him to take more responsibility over the affairs of the school.

Community-based action research is also about the establishment of trust with all community members, those in power and those who have little power. According to Stringer (1996):

> The researcher's role is not to push particular agendas, but to neutralize power differentials in the setting so that the interests of the powerful do not take precedence over those of other participants. But those who undertake this approach to research must allay the fears of people in positions of power, generating levels of trust that enable them to feel sufficiently at ease to release their authority to control events. Their acquiescence is an essential feature of community-based action research. (p. 159)

I believe that my approach to this study has helped this community to realize that there are better ways that a community can work together and share power to enhance

community members' lives in a more humane, life-enhancing, equitable, and liberating way.

Presenting the Resolution to the School Board Meeting

The last step of the gathering circle process was the presentation of the resolution package to the school board (Chief and council). In presenting the resolutions to the board, I intended to preface each resolution with a brief; I wanted to state clearly the constructions of other gathering circles. I was prepared for some defensiveness from the politicians about some of resolutions.

After I read each resolution, the council would be asked to agree, agree but with modifications, or reject the item. Resolutions not agreed to might be brought back to a larger gathering circle of representatives of all the stakeholders. I thought this might be tough to do—to get the political leaders back into yet another meeting, especially one in which they would have to face community members. Frankly, I doubted that this would be possible. I wanted to make it very clear to the Chief and council that it would be in their best interest to resolve as many resolutions as they could during the initial meeting.

The meeting was scheduled for 9:30 in the morning but postponed until 1:00 in the afternoon. At 1:30 I was summoned to the council chambers. Throughout the session council members came and went, but the Chief was present during the entire session. As in gathering circles with other groups, I was pleasantly surprised by the council members' forthrightness. I had expected them to be more guarded. I was also surprised by a discussion that evolved at one point concerning religion in the school. (Some members of the council opposed the presence of religion in the classroom.) The issue was dropped for

fear of starting "a religious war" in the community. In the end, the meeting was too short to deal with many of the resolutions. Another, longer meeting would be needed.

Following this initial meeting, a community member gave me some advice for the next meeting. He advised that to be taken seriously by the board, I should begin by talking more about my own background and experience and that I should speak "more from the heart." He also suggested that perhaps a local member of the community (someone well respected and known to council) should assist me with the presentation of resolutions to the school board. Because I was an outsider, he said, I would not garner the respect necessary to persuade them or to take this exercise seriously.

I took this advice very seriously and approached a distinguished member of the community, himself a former politician, about helping me to present the resolutions to the board. This man reviewed the list and several days later stated that he did not have any problems with the resolutions except that he thought the wording of some of the items should be modified slightly to avoid offending the Chief and council. I purchased a hockey stick for his son as payment for his work.

After a long and very frustrating delay, I finally arranged a second meeting with the board. Scheduled for 9:00 in the morning, it was 11:10 before a quorum (four school board members plus the Chief) was struck. My distinguished co-presenter began the meeting with a prayer and then briefly explained (in the Native language) how the resolutions were arrived at (discussions with community members made up of parents, students, teachers, support staff, managers, Elders, etc.) The Chief then talked briefly about the project, his approval of it eight or nine months previously. It was agreed that each resolution would be read aloud and discussed individually.

As had been predicted (and notwithstanding the best efforts of my co-presenter), the board did take offense to resolution #13 that called for the Chief and council members to be better role models for the community. The item was "tabled for more information."

After some discussion, Resolution #12 (which dealt with sharing information between the school and other social agencies) was approved with the proviso that the words "with approval from band council" be removed from the item.

Resolution #10 (which proposed withholding welfare cheques from parents on social assistance if their children's school attendance fell below 80% attendance) was thought to be unconstitutional by the majority of the board and was tabled for further information.

There was considerable discussion over resolution #13d (concerning making the reserve alcohol free). The Chief stated that the community could be declared dry, but that would not stop members from bringing alcohol onto the reserve or drinking alcohol. Two board members supported it. In the end, the item was tabled for further information.

There was an unexpected discussion about Resolution #13k (that the school board expend band monies in a wise and judicious manner), which I had thought would raise no controversy. The Chief commented that it was "hard to believe that a member would make such a statement." He stated that he had had his tires slashed and received threatening phone calls when attempting to spend band monies in a wise and judicious manner. It was suggested that the word *band* monies be changed to *education* monies. I concurred with this change.

The board consistently disliked vague and imprecise phrasing in the resolutions, and occasionally asked me to define words in the resolutions. They often insisted that the

words "school board" and "Chief and council" be removed from the resolutions to indemnify them from undue responsibility. Generally, the council members thought that most of the leadership resolutions unfairly targeted them. "Council does enact all kinds of resolutions, but if they didn't get support from the parents, there would be no improvement at all," said one member.

In the end, two board members approved Resolution #13k. The majority refrained from responding to the item.

Resolution #14 (concerning an after-school drop-in program) was declared a good idea as long as it did not become a babysitting service for neglectful parents. The board felt that the drop-in centre could emphasize youth dancing and singing.

Over the course of four hours all 190 resolutions were read, discussed, and voted upon. Eight were tabled for further information. The Chief concluded by reminding me to include in my report "the importance of our values and principles, our beliefs, that the cultural traditions of our people must be an important part of our school and for our children to be proud of who they are."

Some days later I contacted the Chief to make arrangements to meet with the board to discuss the final eight remaining resolutions that had been tabled for further information. I explained to the Chief that I would also like to talk to him and other members about the process of the study.

At the subsequent follow-up meeting with the board, each of the tabled resolutions was read again and discussed. The Chief reiterated that one of the resolutions would not stand up to a legal challenge, considering a recent ruling in a Manitoba court. Two more of the eight resolutions were tabled indefinitely for technical reasons. The

remaining five were approved for action. I was very pleased. In all, 187 of the 190 resolutions were approved for action by the school board.

Reviewing the Process

In total, there were 47 people involved in this process. They included Elders, parents, students, teachers, paraprofessionals, health care professionals and school board members. Most were parents or grandparents of children attending the school. I facilitated 42 separate gathering circles and conducted 52 interviews over an 11-month period. Most of the interviewees became members of various circles. The circles varied in size from 3 to 13 people and met between 2 and 18 times over the course of the study. Data gathering and analysis were extensive and exhaustive. Each group worked and reworked its resolutions until the members came to full agreement on their wording and presentation. Nearly a year after the study was completed, 10 of the participants were approached and interviewed for their reflections on the process.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS, REFLECTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In chapter 1 I posed four questions: (a) Can action research be adapted for use as an effective collaborative decision-making process of a locally managed First Nations school in a way that is relevant to the community and reflective of local values? (b) what form would that process take? (c) how well does that process function in practice? and (d) based on the data gathered from this process, how does this community view local education? Clearly, action research evaluation models such as Stake's (1974) can be creatively adapted for use in Native communities to explore their school systems and can probably be further adapted for application to other institutions in those communities. To make the process totally effective—that is, to entirely replace more conventional methods of evaluation in areas such as staff performance assessment— further adaptations must be made. As the data indicate, the process proved highly effective in reconnecting members with their own feelings about their school and connecting all levels of the community in a unified effort to identify and eradicate perceived problems in the school system.

My findings illustrate that action research methods can be melded with traditional forms of community consultation (i.e., Native "talking circles") to form a comfortable and effective method of exploring issues in a Native community. In chapters 3 and 5, I explored the specific form that the process took and its actual application in the community.

In this chapter I reflect on themes that developed upon reflection on my gathering circle transcripts and field notes. I also look at how members of the community viewed

the circle gatherings as a process for discussing educational issues and their motives for participation. I then discuss at length some of the difficulties that I have identified in the process and how the process might be adapted to eliminate them. I will conclude with recommendations and discuss ways to improve and adapt the process to better serve the community's needs.

Participation

Out of a population of about 400 adults, 47 participants were involved in this process. Of these the large majority were parents or grandparents with children in the school. A much larger number of participants would have made the process even more unwieldy, yet would have rendered it more representative. Due to the very nature of the process, volunteers were required to be passionate enough about their beliefs that they were willing to spend the time necessary to work through the process. This could have allowed the advocates to take over; however, I did my best to solicit other community members who had not volunteered (such as the Elder sessions).

The participants who we did attract represented a veritable cross section of the community. This provided balance to the process. The normal clan lines and so on did not appear to come into play in regard to participating in the process, because the groups shared occupation and roles in the community in common. This helped to deflect the clan issue.

Most participants who started the process remained with it throughout. This was very important to the process and gave it continuity. Some took the initiative to do such

things as bringing baked treats for the groups and assisting me with reminding the participants of our upcoming sessions.

The participants got along with each other amazingly well, considering the cross sections that were represented in the various groups. They built a trust in each other that they were there for the betterment of the community. Many participants indicated that they wished that they had been able to interact with the other groups more, but they realized that they would not have been able to be as open and honest had that been the case. It might have been worthwhile to combine the groups for the analysis of the resolutions, rather than having each member doing this individually on paper. As the gathering circles were organized into peer groups, I needed some mechanism for each circle to respond to the resolutions of the other gathering circles. Fifteen members representing all gathering circles except the Elders group and the Chief and council agreed to provide feedback to the resolution list. All resolutions were compiled into one large package and distributed to these participants. Members completed the resolution lists in isolation from one another and then returned them anonymously. They were asked to choose one of the following options for each resolution to indicate their support or lack thereof:

- Will take action
- Yes, but not now
- Tabled for further information
- No action

Despite repeated efforts, two of the participants failed to return completed resolution lists for feedback. One reason provided was simply because she said that she "did not have

time." All of the other participants completed the resolution feedback packages, but one managed to misplace it, and although she said that she completed it the second time, she never provided it for analysis.

Ultimately, not one resolution was removed from the package because none received more than three tabled or no action responses. The groups and I had concluded that a 50% negative response was required for a resolution to be removed as not being supported. As a result, all of the resolutions that had been prepared by the individual gathering circles were presented to the school board for further adjudication.

Reflections

I noted that no one from the community was prepared or willing to take the list of resolutions to Chief and council; this task fell to the informed friend. Was the fear level that high? Did no one believe strongly enough in the process? Was there an inherent feeling that no change would be effected? When the participants were asked about this in post-study conversation, they universally responded that it was fear of reprisal—shooting the messenger—that prevented them from performing this task.

It was also noted that there was no leader from the community who would fill the role of facilitator. Although no suggestions were made as to how to resolve this, it was mentioned that change comes slowly, that it is an ongoing process and will not happen overnight. Others felt that the informed friend was the appropriate courier of this information. They stated that Chief and council were the only ones who could really effect change.

The process revealed that all were in favour of Elder involvement, but wished that the program could be expanded. Not one participant could recall any previous evaluation that had included this important group of people. The fact that the Elders participated also seemed to attract other participatory interest.

Through the gathering circle process, issues arising from this total educational environment became quite evident to participants. The continuum of school-home-community unfolded before us like a map in the discussions of the various circles. It was all there—school concerns, family concerns, concerns for infrastructure and community policing, the yearning for role models, and the love and pride of their culture. The totality of the educational environment was not a mere philosophical construct, but a palpable and natural reality recognized by every community member. And yet as blatantly obvious as it was, no formal evaluation of the school had addressed that reality or even acknowledged its existence. The reason for this failure to grasp that reality is simple: There was no mechanism in standard school evaluation methods by which to consult the community outside the walls of the school. In fact, no prior evaluation had *consulted* at all (except for one parents' meeting with evaluators in 1992). There had been the usual classroom observation, teachers and staff had been questioned, professional abilities had been assessed, test scores analyzed, and so on, but there had been no consultation. No one had ever asked the community members what they wanted from their school. There had been no attempt to push the investigation outside the walls of the school, no attempt to determine the philosophical basis of the school's existence in the minds of the people, and certainly no attempt to solicit solutions to problems within the school from parents or community members.

How Members of the Community Viewed This Process of Discussing Educational Issues

In follow-up interviews to gauge members' reaction to the process, the comments were entirely favorable. For some members it was merely a satisfactory way to discuss longstanding concerns. For others the gathering circles were cathartic, allowing members to pour out pent-up feelings surrounding issues of schooling and the community. For the first time they felt that they had a safe forum to vent concerns. For some of these members the process was a revelation. Other members, including the Chief, were happy to have a process that arose from within the community and that was culturally sensitive and fair. The negativity of past evaluations and the lack of solutions offered by the evaluators had soured the politicians and administrators against outside "experts" who charged large fees to prepare reports that were of no interest or use to the community. This process of examination was seen as a chance to avoid the mistakes of previous evaluators.

How the Participants Viewed the Process

After my final meeting with the school board to discuss the eight tabled resolutions, I discussed the process itself with some of the leaders. I said, "I know that you [the board] were involved with last year's [May-June, 1999] evaluation. Do you notice any difference between what I did this year in the community and what took place last year?" One member responded:

> The previous evaluation didn't involve the people—the community members, the parents, the Elders. But what you are doing is involving the whole community. I like that because it should be the community that comes up with ideas which eventually become policy, or school acts or bylaws. And that way, it will be

> theirs. It's a good idea to talk to community members. Previous evaluations were too lenient. They weren't straightforward and honest. They created the illusion that everything was good when it wasn't, and I am afraid of that. We were looking for honesty. If we're not doing anything right or good we should get honest feedback so that way we can take corrective measures and taken as positive feedback. Whether they call us down or criticize us, it should be taken in a positive light and say, "Okay, if there's something wrong, then we need to change it." There's nothing wrong with feedback and saying, "This thing is not working." We can always fix it or change it or do something with it so that the children benefit.

"Do you feel that this process addressed your own issues and concerns?" I asked.

The member replied, "Yes, I feel pretty comfortable with the process. I think that a lot more school evaluations should be conducted in the same manner as yours."

I asked, "Do you feel that [the other council members] had a chance to voice their points of views and perspectives?

> A few of the councilors—I think they kind of withheld for fear of being called stupid or not understanding. A lot of people keep quiet because of that. They don't express themselves. . . . When it comes to something like this, I think—because if you say something wrong, it's political suicide, especially if you're at the Chief and council level. So something might not happen today, but if you say something, a lot of people don't take it as constructive criticism; they take it personal; like, if you say something bad about the band office. If somebody says it's not working good, then I would check it out myself first, because if there is something we're not doing right, then we can change it. But most people wouldn't think like that. They would take it personal. It's an attack because I run the show.

"How did you personally feel after the gathering circles?" I asked.

> Pretty good. It's just like the way it should be—in our community anyway. A lot of us are going to live here. We were born here. We are going to live here. We are going to die here. It's not like other communities where people move in and move out, where they can sell their houses and move away and buy another house some place else. Here it's not like that. When you live here, you're here for good.

"The process that was used to conduct this study, do you feel it is closer to traditional ways than the last evaluation?" I asked.

Yes, that's the way we did things in the old days. In the old days everybody participated. Everybody had a say whether they were men or women, and even children sometimes were given opportunities to voice their opinions. It takes a whole community to run a school; it doesn't take only certain people. I think it was good. We felt comfortable with the process.

"Is there anything else you want to say about that?" I asked.

I think this study was good, but I think also we should evaluate the Indian Act, the Department of Indian Affairs, and all those people . . . who systematically legislate our lives because we have to meet their terms and conditions. We have to meet their policies. We don't get a chance to incorporate anything that belongs to the community into the system. As a result, it kind of restricts us. It's just like the dominant society saying "my way or the wrong way," which is not fair to us. We should be given a chance to be creative. We should be given a chance to be resourceful and use our imaginations to improve our own lives, and that's not happening.

"In closing, did this study make a difference in any way?"

It's something that can't be measured by any institution. We see a lot of changes. There are attitudes changing. There are personalities changing. There is thinking that is changing, because now, at least, the people are saying, "This is our community. Let's do something." On Aboriginal Day we had a parade. Everyone pitched in and that was a good surprise for me. I think the changes are coming, but it's not noticeable. It's in the mental part, the emotional part, and the spiritual part.

"So you have noticed some positive changes?" I asked.

It's a combination of a lot of things. Everyone had input into the changes. You and myself and the people in the community—everyone deserves credit I think. Not one person or group should take credit for the changes, but everyone. I think that the changes in the community are noticeable though. I like that.

Motivations

After completing the major portion of data gathering for this study, I returned to the community to ask 10 participants what had motivated them to take part and what the experience had meant to them. I wanted to know the extent to which participant action

was stimulated by the gathering circle process and the extent to which the participants were empowered to act. I interviewed each person individually and from an analysis of their transcripts identified four major topics: motivation, involvement, the group process and the role of the facilitator. I have woven their individual comments together to give a nuanced sense of the responses from the ten people. I think that there is powerful evidence in these final interviews that the process worked in a fundamental way in this community, initiating real change in the participants themselves, empowering them to be leaders in future community changes.

"What motivated you to want to be involved in the study?"

> Number one, because we would like to see change. We can't have change without talking about it. We definitely wanted to see some change. And number two, because the process was anonymous. Out here that's very important. There was no direct, "You said this." It keeps it nonpersonal.

"Was the anonymous aspect of the study important to you?"

Member: "Yes."

"Would you have become involved in the study if you knew it wouldn't be anonymous?"

> Yes, I would have, I would have, but there are also some things that I would not have discussed. Like, there are some of those issues that we came across and some things that we said that we just wouldn't have gotten to. They just would have remained silent—including myself.

"Has that happened in the past where certain groups in the past have not been happy about certain things in the community, and they have remained silent because they felt that was the best thing to do?"

Member: "Oh definitely. The best thing to do was to keep quiet, unsaid for fear that you would lose your job. That is a real fear. Absolutely."

"Why do you think there was that element of fear?"

Member: "On our part primarily because there's no stability here. I mean, you can be fired on a whim, basically. We all know that."

"Has there been some change as a result of our gathering circles?"

Member: "Yes."

"Was there any other motivation for you to want to be involved in this study this year?"

> I wanted change. . . . Another motivation would be . . . that it's done by somebody who does not have anything to gain on one side or the other. You're independent. When something is started by the board, like it or not, we always assume that the board has their own agenda. If it's initiated by the teachers, then everyone else assumes that it's just to benefit what the teachers want. . . . When it's done by an outsider, independent person [like you] with no agenda, it's taken a lot more seriously; . . . there's no hidden assumptions behind it.

"Any outsider would have been fine—is that what you're saying?"

Member: "As long as it's somebody who is trusted and independent."

"Was there a perception among members of your gathering circle that I was meeting those expectations?"

Member: "Yes."

Another member had these reactions:

"What motivated you to become involved in this study project in the community?"

> One of my main motivations is that we have so many children out of school, so many children who are not even interested in school, and there seems to be no guiding principles. . . . [We need the] support of all the people in the community to work out a plan to help these kids and get them back to school. I hate to say

this, but there doesn't seem to be any motivation to keep the children in school in this community. The kids don't seem to have any interest. They don't see anything in it for them for the future. So it's more like you have to take these children into your own hands and you have to keep them in school coercively until they find something that changes their mind about the direction and attitude in school. Something has to be there [in school] that will captivate their interest; some ability they have has to be discovered and explored so that they will be motivated enough to want to stay in school. We should have a large student population, which we don't. There's no one saying, "Yes, we should keep these kids in school." If they don't want to be in school, it's their right, so they're allowed to roam on the road. Even a five-year-old walks around peeking into windows of other buildings, but never in the school. And so I thought, "I am part of the problem." I believe that this community is a large part of the problem. The generation before me, myself, a few younger than me—we are all part of the problem, so we must start to think how we can be more a part of the solution.

"Why do you think you are part of the problem?"

Because it's our values that have deteriorated over the years. It's our values that have created all of this problem about our children being—not understanding that they are not respecting their bodies, they're not respecting themselves. . . . We need to have these guiding principles that are going to help us keep or at least get our children to . . . education levels so that they can be self-sufficient adults because we say they're our future. They are the future, but what kind of future will it be for my grandchildren if changes aren't made now? If the young people today are floundering around and lost and not recognizing the importance of formal education, our community will be doomed.

"What motivated you to be involved in the study?"

I thought that you were going to develop some kind of a model or come up with some kind of solution to see where all of the cracks were, . . . a model for us that's going to stay on the reserve, that people could look at and say, "Okay, here's all of this, and what can we do with this? We have all of these things that have been pointed out to us as the problem, and we have all of these other solutions. . . . Ascertain your problem, then you come up with your solution. Then you go through the process of elimination, and this is what you find out." And I thought, "This is what we're going to get. We are finally going to understand how we can help ourselves and why we are so unsuccessful with our education system."

"Do you think that we are moving in the right direction with a study like this one?"

> Well, I think we are. I think that even our small gathering circle listed a whole lot of things that might be the problem, and if we completely eliminated or restructured what was there before to see how thing will improve. I wanted the school system improved, and I wanted to see our children really appreciate our school and stay in school and learn something. I wanted them to get that interest back in schooling.
>
> Like, another one of my motivations for saying yes was, I was so certain that we were going to have some model—that was my whole thing, a model. I can't think of anything else beyond the model of a successful educational system and to be able to use that model to see where all the strengths and weaknesses are, and to see where we have to go to achieve that successful school system.

One community member stressed that the issues set forth in the gathering circle were like "guiding principles" for viewing and solving the community's difficulties. "You had different things that we had gone through, . . . political aspects of the community that affected the school, . . . people aspects, . . . and so on." The process revealed to this community member how different groups in the community needed to interact together and come to consensus about important issues—"[the] need to focus and think in the same way," as she put it.

"So you seem to be saying that within your gathering circle discussions, you found a way to see the community and its problems differently than before?"

> Even though the model is not out there like I had envisioned it in the first place, . . . there is a circular model in my head that I can use to resolve problems for myself and my community. And these problems may not be educational because even in our own work group now, I have initiated things that came out of the gathering circles. I use [the process of identifying claims, concerns, and issues] the same way that we used it in the gathering circles to teach the young mothers and fathers in this community. So we've done that in our lesson planning. I have even remodeled my Head Start handbook to focus in the areas that came out of our gathering circles. . . . It's a way now that I use to help me to teach others.

"Is there anything else?"

> It's personal too. I want to see more positive things coming from the school. It's been so negative in the past. Your study has shown me that what I am doing now

> with the Head Start Program is very important. I want this program to teach the children that school can be a pleasant and fun experience rather than being scary like I have seen in the past. We try to direct the children in the most positive way that we are able to, but we are still not successful. So we need to involve the parents; we need to involve the parents into their child's education. Sometimes it takes older people like me.

The participants were unanimous in stating that the gathering circle process was better than previous evaluation methods had been. "You going out and talking to the community and the Elders and talking to some of the leaders was really worthwhile. I think the process you used was better than the [previous] school evaluation," said one participant.

"Did you feel comfortable talking freely within your own gathering circle and the confidentiality aspects?"

> I wasn't too concerned with confidentiality. Usually when you're speaking about what can be done to improve the school, . . . people were speaking in all honesty. . . . And so if you're speaking honestly, then you're speaking from the heart, and maybe people need to hear that. We know what happens here. We know what goes on. Why hide it? We see it. We experience it, and so it's important for people to come out and hear what we have to say.

Speaking of motivation to participate, another member said:

> Well, I see how corrupted the school is at that time. The teachers sometimes don't understand the Native children. They're totally different. They're from the White society. It seems like the Native children raise themselves and have no guidance or no support. I have a lot of grandchildren, and when I seen it happening in my own family circle—the way children are raised now is totally different from when I was a parent. I wanted to see some changes. This can't be allowed to continue over and over again. It seems like where I think most of the parents are just like ostriches. They bury their heads in the sand and ignore things when they could make things better for the children. They should deal with that issue and getting other parents involved.

"What about the gathering circle process itself?"

> I think it was very good. The people say that they have no one to talk to when there is a problem at the school. Now that everybody has input—young and old—I think that they now understand how to communicate with one another, because that's how I see it now. The communication in the community is starting to take place, whereas before people have always argued and disagreed with one another as to how things should be done. Even the communication between parents and teachers has improved. When we have parents and teachers at interviews—even for myself—we always say that we are too tired to go and meet the teachers and see how our children are doing. It seems like we have neglected our children. But now maybe it's different. . . . I think now with this study and getting everyone involved, maybe the children too will look at education differently.

In a follow-up interview with a school official, I asked whether my study had been more or less intrusive than the last school evaluation. It was this official's opinion that the study had been less intrusive and that it was a process with which the community could feel comfortable. This official went on to say:

> The approach gave us an opportunity to mention the things that needed to be said. When someone comes in from the outside and does the evaluation and doesn't really know the people, they give you a really hard criticism. But they don't see the good things that this place has to offer.
>
> *"What do you mean when you say the process was less intrusive?"*
>
> Last year—the time they did the evaluation—I guess it was the way [the evaluator] presented himself: "This is the way I want it done. This is what I am going to do. These are the questions that I am going to ask. These are the questions I want answered." None of the Elders from our community were involved in the process. Our Elders never got a chance to sit down with the evaluators and say, "This is what I would like to see evaluated." They have the history of [the community] in their hearts. They have the history of the school. They've been around for so long that some of the things they see in school might not work, but there are some things that need to be added. There is a dialogue inside their minds and hearts already. [Not including the Elders] was kind of like pushing them out. It wasn't . [We didn't have] a really good evaluation, I thought. It didn't look at the Native aspect of it all. It kind of looked at whether the school was following rules.

This official also made it clear that the main reason that previous evaluations had been left to gather dust was that they had little to do with the community. The evaluations were not their own. "It's something that the community had little part in."

According to this official, the previous evaluator was more interested in detecting deviation from "the rules" of running an effective school. "He just wrote down that we weren't going by the books." The evaluator, this official went on to say, avoided exploring *why* this was the case. "So, in that sense, he took the easy way out."

Difficulties With the Process

Although the participants were pleased with the process, I want to review in detail some components of the methodology and identify those parts of the process that were either problematic or that could be made more effective for future use.

Claims: A Method of Recognizing Success

Although, chronologically, "claims" came last in the initial data-gathering process of the circles, I have analyzed the methodology of claims to illustrate most clearly certain strengths and weaknesses inherent in the circle data gathering methodology as a whole.

Of the three categories of statements produced by the gathering circles—claims, concerns, and issues, the role of claims may seem puzzling at first and of the least importance in identifying the shortcomings of the school and producing resolutions addressing those shortcomings. However, in practical application, claims—statements identifying what is good and successful in the system under consideration—served two distinct purposes: (a) identifying successes, and (b) building morale.

Identifying success. Claims allow members to identify successes in the system. By analyzing those successes, it may be possible to discover techniques of success that can be applied in a cross-disciplinary way to ongoing problems. No technique will be applicable in all situations, but many successful techniques will have applications in more than one area. Identifying successes in the sports program or the language program, for instance, may yield techniques applicable to less successful programs.

Claims build morale. The major purpose of the gathering circles is, of course, the identification of problems in the school and the development of solutions to those problems. To that end, participants will often need to dwell on painful and negative aspects of their school and community. Although this may prove cathartic in the short term, reflecting on difficulties may produce long-term feelings of hopelessness, leading to an erosion of morale among community members. In some communities low morale among teachers and parents may already be a longstanding issue. During the course of our gathering circles I certainly often heard members express feelings of despair and helplessness. Therefore, psychologically, it is important to spend at least one meeting during the process focusing on claims, those things that members identify as good, functional, or improving in the school and the community. Reflecting positively on good things that have already been achieved or that are already embodied by the school builds in the participants a justifiable feeling of pride in their accomplishments.

When discussing claims, I usually began the session by saying something like, "Today we will be talking about any claims you have concerning the school system in this community. Claims are any comments about things you feel are working well." These sessions were very positive experiences for the participants. Many community

members did not fully realize the amount of good work that had already been achieved in the school system until they vocalized them in the form of claims.

In the case of this community, among the most prevalent claims were matters surrounding achievements in bolstering Native pride and the preservation of Native culture.

Claims as sources of cultural pride. In communities or organizations whose membership comprises a minority culture group, some claims tending to bolster cultural pride should be expected. In the case of this community, the members were justly proud of the school's Native language program, which had succeeded to the point that children were now heard speaking together in the Native language in the halls between classes. Just a few years earlier it had been feared that the language was on the verge of being lost. Concomitant with the language program, the members also cited the teaching of traditional crafts and skills, such as Native cooking and weekly visits to the school by community Elders. There was a feeling that these programs were having a genuine effect in instilling pride for their culture in students, one of the stated goals of education in this community. A member of the staff noted a correlation between the success of these programs and fewer suspensions of students for disciplinary problems. Oddly, the Elders themselves, in their gathering circle, expressed doubts as to whether anyone really listened to them or whether they were capable of having a positive influence on the young. This may have been false modesty, or it may have signaled a genuine lack of communication and appreciative feedback to the Elders from members of the younger generations. There was no doubt among members of all the other circles that the Elders were having a very positive influence on the school.

Student claims. Disturbingly, students interviewed at this school had very few positive claims to make. They identified a single teacher whom they thought really cared about their futures. They also spoke highly of *some* aspects of the sports program. Admittedly, a very small number of students were interviewed. A larger sampling of student opinion might have raised more claims.

Difficulty separating claims from issues. In some cases it was difficult for members to separate positive claims from negative concerns and issues, especially in areas where there had been both notable successes and failures. For instance, the school has made great strides in providing computer access for students, which has resulted in greater computer literacy; but at the same time, constant theft and destruction of computer lab equipment remains a serious and expensive problem, and at the time of this study, the computer lab did not have access to the Internet yet. It was hard for many members to separate these positive and negative aspects associated with the subject of the school's computer program, and any discussion of the positive aspects almost immediately led to mention of the negative aspects. In such situations it remains to be seen whether it is wise for the facilitator to curtail the discussion of concerns and issues during a claims sessions at the risk of inhibiting members who see no natural division between the negative and positive aspects of a subject, or to allow a venting of concerns when they occur naturally in the context of the discussion. Sometimes it was enough to allow the member to voice the concern, after which I would say something like, "Yes, I will make note that there are concerns and issues about this subject as well, and we can raise those again at an appropriate time. Now, are there any more claims?" (The facilitator should remember that claims do not require the degree of consensus that issues,

concerns, and resolutions do.) In other cases, some further questioning and clarification may be necessary to disentangle claims from issues and concerns. When clarification was reached and a precise claim extracted, I usually asked the group to set aside the issues and concerns associated with the subject until the appropriate time. I myself carefully noted these set-aside issues so that they would not be forgotten. (Due to the chronological order of gathering concerns and issues before claims, those that arose during claims gathering had usually been dealt with already anyway. However, one must be open to new issues at any point in the process before the final list of resolutions is drafted.)

Of course, in some cases claims will be prefaced by background information that may indicate how a negative situation has improved. For instance, when claiming an improvement in the implementation of the discipline policy in the school, members gave a brief background account of the situation before that improvement. This is entirely natural and permissible. It is only when a statement of a positive claim segues into a rehearsal of a multitude of negative aspects of the subject that the facilitator must remind the participants that issues and concerns should be dealt with separately. The gathering circle process demands a degree of mental discipline from participants, requiring that they marshal and separate ideas in a way in which they may not be used to in their everyday lives. This discipline should not be so onerous as to interfere with the free flow of ideas within the circle, but it should nevertheless be evident to participants that the gathering circle is a special space where a special kind of concentrated thought is required. It is not a place for malicious gossip or mere complaining; it is a space set apart for seeking solutions to important questions. The facilitator must gauge the ability of the individuals in each group and the group as a whole to discipline themselves. The

facilitator must decide what degree of structure in the data-gathering process will be appropriate to the group in question without being oppressive to the members.

Wishful thinking in the form of claims. In the course of the study I found that claims were sometimes only wishful thinking on the part of the member—what the member would *like* to see happen, expressed in the form of a claim. This form of expressing ideals was particularly evident when I privately interviewed the community members in administrative positions. There was a tendency in these interviews for the participant to try to put the best face on every situation. Their claims of improvement in some areas were in complete contradiction to the views held by the majority of other community members. In my role as facilitator, I was often uncertain whether (or to what degree) to challenge claims when they seemed exaggerated or unrealistic. A facilitator must use careful judgment before challenging the statement of a community member. I asked myself, Am I in a position to know with certainty that the claim is exaggerated or unrealistic? Is there an inner validity to the participant's view of reality that might lead to a deeper understanding of other issues? Will my challenge motivate the participant to constructive reflection on the nature of the claim, or will the challenge merely embarrass the participant, leading to resentment and silence?

I must also admit that I was reluctant to challenge the claims of those community members in positions of authority because of my perception that I needed their continuing support to complete my study. I believe now that I overestimated the fragility of my welcome in the community, and given the opportunity to repeat the process, I might well be tougher on the claims of those members in positions of authority.

A researcher in the field often walks a fine line when interviewing community members. Every member's opinion is valid, but the researcher must also consider whether the community member is expressing the fruits of genuine reflection upon the issues at hand or simply rehearsing unconsidered prejudices, second-hand opinions, or wishful thinking. The facilitator must sometimes encourage a member to look beyond these preconceptions to find real, heart-felt opinions; but at the same time the facilitator must not coerce that member away from what may be a genuine opinion; nor must the facilitator seem to criticize members for their opinions. The facilitator must be flexible and use judgment on a case-by-case basis.

A case in point was the Elders' circle. Often the Elders seemed to base their opinions of the school on unsubstantiated hearsay, leading them to have a much more negative impression than those of the members who had day-to-day experience in the school. Whereas every other group was of the opinion that the school was steadily improving, the Elders' general impression was that things were getting worse at the school. In this case, as a facilitator, I found it best *not* to challenge the opinions of the Elders, but simply to record them out of respect for their venerable position in the community. The fact that the Elders were somewhat out of touch with the reality of the school in no way indicated that the respect invested in them by the community was misplaced. The Elders are not the school board, nor are they parents of young children or members of the school staff. There is no reason why they would be well informed on the specifics of the school. Their opinions on the management of the school must be viewed and analyzed in the context of their position in the community and their access to information. One must also consider the possibility that an extremely conservative and

pessimistic stance may be inherent to the role of Elder in this culture as an anodyne to the enthusiasm of younger hearts. Apart from their opinions on topical matters, it is unquestioned that the Elders are the primary repository of traditional morals, skills, wisdom, and language in this community; and it is in that role that they have proven invaluable to the school.

Using the Claims Process

An analysis of the claims gathered in this community shows that they fell roughly into nine categories of identifying areas of success and improvement: (a) fundamentals, (b) management, (c) staff, (d) programs, (e) policies, (f) communications, (g) community, (h) externals, and (i) climate.

Were I to repeat this study under approximately the same circumstances, I would use these nine categories as specific guidelines for the groups to streamline the process of gathering claims. I believe that reviewing these categories with the members would allow them to focus more easily on factors of success in and around their school. Having these categories in mind when gathering claims would give greater structure to the process and avoid a certain amount of initial floundering for those not used to the process. The same categories, with some slight modification, can also be used when gathering issues and concerns.

A Note on Practical Semantics: "Issues, Concerns, and Claims"

Throughout this study I have referred to claims, issues, and concerns, following terminology used by Guba, Lincoln, and others. As stated in the previous chapter, an issue is defined as any state of affairs about which reasonable people may disagree. A

concern is an assertion that is unfavorable to the evaluand. A claim is an assertion favorable to the evaluand. But many authors, including those who have helped define these terms, tend to use "issues" and "concerns" interchangeably. Both Stringer (1996) and Stake (1974) referred to "issues and problems" without indication that the two terms need to be strictly differentiated. In practical application I found that it was impossible to separate "concerns and issues" into "concerns" *and* "issues"; nor did I trouble the members of the groups with the technical definitions of those terms as cited in the literature; I allowed them to apply everyday meanings to these terms. There never seemed to be any doubt in their minds that when we were discussing "concerns and issues" we were in fact discussing "problems"—a term much less likely to be misconstrued by those not versed in sociology-speak. Problems demand solutions (another term with which all members of the community seemed comfortable), and solutions evolve into resolutions when put into action. I would suggest that in future applications of the gathering circle methodology, the three types of initial statements issuing from circles be enumerated as claims, problems, and solutions; and that from these should be forged the final form of group statement, resolutions—a resolution being defined as a statement of a problem and its possible solution, sometimes modified or prefaced by a claim. Combining issues and concerns into the omnibus term "problems" may sweep away certain philosophical niceties inherent in the different definitions of the former, but in practical use such niceties are lost anyway. Whatever terminology the facilitator chooses, it should not deviate far from the everyday speech of the participants, nor should the facilitator become fixated on precise definitions of textbook terms when explaining the process to the

participants. I feel that the spectrum of claims/problems/solutions/resolutions encapsulates the process more exactly than the textbook terminology.

The Problem of Foreknowledge

My familiarity with the community enabled me to enter the research arena particularly open to the identification of community concerns. To a large degree I had a good sense of the community's cultural context in which this study was enmeshed. I was also aware that I could not take this personal acculturation for granted; such an assumption could lead me to draw erroneous or hasty conclusions about the motives and meanings of participants' statements. I also knew my unique situation could provide me with greater insight into this community's situation. I did not assume that I knew in advance what these people were thinking. I was fully prepared to be surprised in seemingly familiar surroundings.

To borrow Gadamer's (1990) terminology, with each stage and each circle a new horizon of personal understanding should emerge, reordering foreknowledge, which in this case is my personal, initial horizon. My foreknowledge included structural information concerning the society that better allowed me to organize peer groups into gathering circles within the various spheres of the community. I believe that my prior acquaintance with this community allowed me an instant ingress into networks within this society that would have been unavailable to an outsider. Of course, at the outset of my study I could not predict to what degree my foreknowledge of the structure of the community would come into play as I planned and proceeded with my research. Therein lay the importance of scrupulously auditing my own biases and preconceptions as they

arose during the work. I took care that prior understandings that could have marred my new understanding were noted and compensated for to the best of my ability.

Parent Apathy

Parent apathy was identified as a major factor in the school's perceived laxity of discipline. The following exchange between a parent member and the facilitator during a concerns-and-issues gathering phase of one of the circles illustrates the typical view of this problem in the community.

> Profanity is just outrageous in that school. Every few minutes you can hear somebody swearing. And this is through all of the age groups. To me, some of the things that come out of these children's mouths, I don't know where they learn them. . . . You have people just using it like it were their first language. It's really terrible. I've seen children in this school swear at adults [and] walk away and not taking any responsibility for what they had just done, not even realizing that what they did was really inappropriate. It happens every day. Kids just standing there saying the 'F' word really loud. You wouldn't find it in any other school. Never. But it's acceptable there. What can teachers do? What can the staff do? They can't say "Come back" to the child because the child won't come back. The child will just walk away: "To heck with you. I've sworn at you. I've said what I wanted to say to you. Now leave me alone." What is the parent, teacher, or staff going to do? Nothing, because they can't do anything. I think it's because of lack of discipline on the parents' part that this child is doing this. . . . If you . . . told the parents, they would laugh. They probably wouldn't care. I am sure their child does that at home. . . . I wouldn't doubt it that these kids swear at their parents.

"Is there any other reason why you feel that this might be happening?" I asked.

> I think a lot of children end up having to stand up for themselves because nobody else will. Maybe they've witnessed that that is a mechanism that works, and they use it. I think it's a really hard thing. Some of the kids I see swearing there, I know their parents and their parents talk like that too.

"What are the teachers to do in a situation like that? Do you get the sense that they have the authority they need in order to act in a way to reduce this type of behavior?"

> I don't think they have the authority. No. If it were my child and I was called in, . . . I would be there to confront the situation with my child. . . . It's not appropriate behavior, period. But with kids' parents who don't care and just send them to school—. . . I feel like parents . . . really don't care. They just send their kids to school and that's it. Whatever goes on in school is the school's responsibility. But "you can't touch my kid. You can't discipline my kid. You can't tell my kid what to do." So, if that's the message the kids understand, then they will maximize on it. Basically, you've created no boundaries for your child, so the child is without boundaries. He doesn't have any boundaries on what they can or can't do. They can do anything, and nothing will happen.

This discussion expanded to deal with school violence in similar terms.

It should be remembered that these are the perceptions of a motivated parent. One of the unavoidable flaws of the methodology is the voluntary nature of participation. Members who choose to participate in the gathering circles are also those members who are apt to participate to a high degree in their children's schooling. The process gives no voice to those who choose not to participate. The so-called apathetic parents in this community had no voice in this process. Arguably, this was their choice, but because a number of the resolutions reached by the process will (in theory) affect these parents directly, their lack of input remains problematic. Their silence creates a gap in our picture of the community, and we are forced to see them through the eyes of their neighbors. This can only further alienate these apathetic parents and produce a them-and-us attitude among participants. Perhaps only public education on the importance of participating in their children's school and, in some cases, social work with troubled families will overcome this difficulty. There is a strong feeling in this community that apathy is linked to addiction.

The Circle Methodology Relies on Goodwill and a Spirit of Cooperation

Without the goodwill of community members and leaders, it is unlikely that this study would have been as successful as it was. It must be noted that it was undertaken between elections, during a period of relative calm on the reserve, and also after a number of internal reforms had been enacted that saw the replacement of the previous principal and director of education and the institution and enforcement of new disciplinary policies in the school. Given the fact that the school board remains enmeshed in the politics of the reserve, there is no guarantee that the current calm will survive the next election.

As I began my work with the people for this study, I was led to believe that there was a serious division between traditionalists and religionists concerning the Native language program in the school. Yet during the circle process and in the interviews, there was almost universal praise from parents and staff for the Native language and skills programs and the visiting-Elder program. The effectiveness of these programs had been proven by experience.

It remains uncertain whether the circle methodology would function as well (or at all) in communities or institutions during times of extraordinary stress caused by political or labor unrest or serious internal conflicts. In this community, in spite of longstanding political differences between two groups and some dissatisfaction and uncertainty among school staff, there was considerable uniformity of opinion when it came to the school and its problems.

School Board as a Watchdog

Obviously, a school board or governing body of an institution must function within budgetary limits, legal parameters, good public policy, the best interest of students, and the mandates of its authority. It is not realistic to expect that every resolution put forward by the circle process can be approved within these restraints. However, if the resolution falls within these restraints, and if it reflects the collective will of the participants, would the school board ever be justified in refusing to enact a resolution? Naturally, two contradictory resolutions cannot be enacted together; nor can a resolution be enacted that runs contrary to the current operations of the school *without making it clear how those operations will be changed to accommodate the new policy or program being enacted.* It is inevitable that even with the best intentions the circle groups will occasionally propose a resolution that might require the sacrifice of another desirable program or policy. In such cases it is up to the school board to act as a watchdog and to advise responsibly. Resolutions tabled for this reason should be sent back to the circles with the board's advice, to be reshaped or abandoned as unworkable.

I can also foresee a situation in which a resolution might run contrary to the self-interest of the board itself. Resolutions that change or limit the powers of the board, change its structure, or lower board members' salaries and remuneration, for instance, are apt to meet with considerable resistance from the board members. In the case of this community, it was resolved that the school board should become a separate entity from the band council. At first even board members seemed willing to consider this possibility, but as the process drew to a conclusion, it was obvious that the council was as yet unprepared to surrender their direct control over the school. It is unlikely that a school

board will act against its own self-interest. This is another case in which a lack of goodwill on the part of participants, including board members, could sabotage the circle process. A hostile or recalcitrant board could render the whole process futile.

Referring back to the description and accompanying chart in chapter 3 describing the process of moving through the circles, gathering claims, issues and concerns, and achieving consensus on resolutions, it will be seen that the process can form a circuit. Data gathered from the circles can be cycled through the process as many times as are required to refine resolutions and achieve consensus. Although in the case of this community a successful set of resolutions was reached in a single cycle, one could foresee contentious situations in which resolutions could be sent back through the process a number of times. Other than artificial time limits on the process, there is no mechanism for determining when a resolution has no chance of being accepted, nor is there a mechanism for mediation in the case of a deadlock between groups. If the methodology is established as a permanent part of an institution's problem-solving or self-examination process, an agreed-upon mechanism of mediation should be established to handle difficult situations.

In cases in which the authorities are hostile to any change from within, it is still possible that the circle process could be used within an institution, but without the expectation that circles will be recognized or sanctioned by the governing body. Such circles could be used for fact finding, to resolve conflicts, or to clarify and unify the group position.

Six Areas of Specific Weakness in the Process

The following are six specific weaknesses in the process that should be addressed when implementing the gathering circle methodology.

1. Lack of voice for non-participants: As long as participation by parents (and others) is voluntary, input will tend to come from motivated members of the community. Less motivated members will have no voice and will be characterized by the views of the participants. In such cases the facilitator should make every effort to give voice to everyone—if not through circles, than through individual interviews with those reluctant to participate in the circles. When this is not possible, it is the duty of the facilitator to be aware of the incomplete nature of the process and to make note of it.

2. Lack of structured inquiry, leading to an incomplete picture of the situation: Because the participants in the gathering circles raise their own claims, issues, and concerns, there is the possibility that they may overlook critical issues.

3. Need for additional evaluation techniques to determine school staff performance: Gathering circles will not replace the need to evaluate teachers and other staff members periodically in more structured ways, to ensure their level of performance. This could be handled by some form of peer review using set guidelines and could be used in adjunct with a permanent or semipermanent teacher's gathering circle. Similar peer review and permanent circles could be maintained for other staff members.

4. Need for compulsory participation by staff and students: In traditional school evaluations, participation by staff and students of the school is not voluntary. If gathering-circle methodology is to be a viable method of determining the effectiveness of a school, all staff members and students should be included in some way. In the case of

students, truncated sessions to gather claims, issues, and concerns should be worked into school hours. The methodology will need to be adapted according to the ages of the students.

5. Need for a permanent gathering circle methodology: For optimum effectiveness, I believe that the gathering circle methodology should be installed as a permanent part of the school-community environment, with ongoing staff circles and parent circles. Staff circles could form a basis for more structured peer reviews of staff performance (see #3 above), and ongoing parent circles could form the nucleus of a parents' association, with continuous input into school policy.

6. Need for more direct intergroup consultation: I feel that in order for the gathering circle methodology to function as a permanent and effective means of managing change and challenge in a school, there will be a need for greater intergroup consultation than takes place in this initial, experimental process. The process in this community was governed by a fear that too much intergroup interaction would stifle the free and confidential expression of ideas. I feel that if circles were established as a permanent part of the school system, with time, greater trust between groups would allow more intergroup input, and mixed groups and other experimental groupings for brainstorming and so on.

Recommendations

1. The gathering circle methodology is viable.
2. The methodology could ensure effective Native schools.

3. Evaluations conducted with no local input are not meaningful to the community.
4. Community members must be involved from beginning to end of the process.
5. The whirlpool effect of gathering circles taking a life of their own provides the basis for ongoing continued improvement of the school.
6. Communities must monitor the schools as a function of achieving the goals of the people for their children.

To identify this methodology as particularly suited to Native schools is to assume that all Native schools and Native communities are the same or that all Native communities will respond similarly to a certain process. And although the circle methodology was inspired by traditional Native methods of communal consultation, it would be a disservice both to the process and to the wisdom of traditional Native cultures to assume that the process cannot be extended successfully to other culture settings.

The gathering circle methodology as described in previous chapters is a viable model of community- or institution-based and -driven examination in any culture setting that allows for cross-community consensus, with the caveat that it will not entirely replace more rigorous examinations of staff performance. However, if a form of rigorous peer review with set guidelines can be incorporated into the gathering circle methodology, a school—or as I would like to say, the school-community continuum—can be largely self-evaluating, especially when dealing with matters of educational philosophy, the propagation and protection of culture, and discipline and student policy. These methods, in concert with a diligent school board, director of education, and parents' association (perhaps organized along the lines of gathering circles), could ensure

a functional system for governing, managing, and maintaining an effective school in Native or non-Native communities.

Past evaluations designed to improve the educational system in this community have been performed by people from the outside and not by the people themselves. When the school, the board, and the community at large have no input into forming those recommendations, the act of outsiders presenting final recommendations to the school board on what should or should not be done serves little purpose in improving the school. A set of recommendations handed to the community by an outside agency as a *fait accompli* will always have an alienating effect. Those most affected by change should be included in the change process. An examination of a school system must go beyond merely giving ideas and information. It should involve a wide range of community members in the learning process in order to inform and unify the community as a whole. The facilitator must meet with the people and promote their participation in choosing the best ways to solve their own problems—people-generated solutions to solve their problems. It is the process itself that leads to the empowerment of people. What was unique about this process was the continuous presence of the members of this community as participants. From beginning to end, it was the voice of the community that guided the process. The community was heard. The community heard itself, listened to its own wisdom. Because members of the school board and administrative figures in the school were treated *as* community members in the process, the divide between "them and us"—between passive community members and their elected and appointed school leadership— was minimized. The community acted in unity.

Community members must have full participation to make a meaningful contribution to the improvement of their school and the community as a whole. I am under no illusions that I have talked to everyone in this community, but I did talk to more members than former evaluators did.

Community members saw the school through different value lenses. Some of the leadership (and others in the community as well) saw the school as a means of employment and revenue for members. They will do what is best to maintain the school for economic reasons, but not necessarily what is best for the children. It brings in much-needed funding to reduce unemployment and shore up an otherwise economically depressed community. Without the school, more local people would be unemployed and forced to go on welfare or leave the community. For many others, the school was viewed through a lens of civic pride. In the interviews many of the participants stated that they were proud of their community school despite the fact that, from an outside perspective, the school was failing to meet the needs of the students. There was also a cultural lens that people used to view the school. The school is theirs. This view sees the school as a way to teach their children the cultural values (customs, heritage, history) of the community. Given this Native nation's history with education (boarding homes, residential schooling), this is their way to counter this deplorable history that is still fresh in the minds of some parents. Other community members saw the school as the community's future, a path by which this community would grow and become more successful.

Suggestions from outsiders—such as plans for alternative schooling systems in which, for instance, community children are bused off the reserve to county schools or

White children are bused onto the reserve to raise the school's funding profile—amount to "trying to save the people from themselves" or, in effect, once again taking the education of their children out of their hands. No matter how imperfect their school is, it is their school. There is no indication that the community would ever be willing relinquish their control over local education again.

One school official identified a serious Catch-22 situation involving funding and the school population, concerning parents whose children were then attending off-reserve schools. According to this official, if those parents brought their children back to the community school on the reserve, there would be more money from which to operate. But without the funding to make the school more attractive to those parents, those parents would not return their children. There were also those families who, due to a shortage of decent housing, had moved off the reserve to nearby communities. They saw life on the reserve as a dead end and were unwilling to move back or to send their children back to the reserve school. Unless the reserve community as a whole became a more attractive home for these disaffected Natives and until it could be shown to be a community with a viable future, there would be no return of disaffected Natives, and the exodus away from the community would continue.

There were indications of a willingness in the community to continue using this gathering circles process. However, it remains to be seen whether the people are ready for the depth of introspection necessary to sustain a critical and analytical dialogue about the school and the pressing social problems facing the community, or whether the process can overcome the apathy and entrenched political realities that I witnessed there. With local control comes the responsibility of local decision making. Unless decisions are

made on the basis of definitive goals and based on a firm knowledge of the issues, decision making will be a matter of trial and error, and the school will drift through transitory successes and failures. Successes and failures in a school are measured in the quality of the lives of its students both during and after the school experience. If this community is to build on its successes and minimize its failures, it must establish some process to monitor the school with an ongoing evaluation, a process that will function beyond the politics and will reflect the goals of the people for their children. Will an internal process such as the gathering circles entirely replace the need for external consultants? Probably not. Education in the 21st century will become increasingly complex, requiring disciplines and expertise that will not always be found within the community. Skilled educators and administrators will be more necessary than ever. Outside experts will play a role in setting up technical programs. However, a process such as the gathering circles can inform the input of those outside experts. During the course of this study, the community found a voice in their educational system. That voice must continue to be heard.

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